



Original article



Construction of meanings of domestic violence in children in educational contexts





Construcción de significados de violencia intrafamiliar en niños y niñas en contextos educativos

Construção de significados de violência doméstica em crianças em contextos educacionais

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ABSTRACT

How do children perceive violence? Going beyond studies that analyze it from an external perspective, this article delves into their own voices, exploring how they identify, interpret, and assimilate it in their everyday environment. Using an interdisciplinary approach that intertwines psychology, pedagogy, and sociocultural analysis, this article examines the construction of the meaning of violence in childhood and the factors that influence its perception. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, it delves into the impact of different levels of the environment -family, school, community, and culture- on the way children understand and confront violence. It also analyzes the role of adults and institutions in validating or minimizing these experiences, highlighting the urgency of creating safe spaces for children's expression. This article seeks to transform the narrative about

child violence, placing children as protagonists and offering keys to designing educational and social strategies that truly respond to their reality.

Keywords: conflict; school; family; reactions; meanings; domestic violence.

RESUMEN

¿Cómo perciben los niños la violencia? Más allá de los estudios que la analizan desde una perspectiva externa, este trabajo se sumerge en sus propias voces, explorando cómo la identifican, la interpretan y la asimilan en su entorno cotidiano. Desde un enfoque interdisciplinario que entrelaza psicología, pedagogía y análisis sociocultural, se examina la construcción del significado de violencia en la infancia y los factores que influyen en su percepción. A través del modelo ecológico de Bronfenbrenner, se profundiza en el impacto de los distintos niveles del entorno -familia, escuela, comunidad y cultura- en la manera en que los niños comprenden y enfrentan la violencia. También se analiza el papel de los adultos e instituciones en la validación o minimización de estas experiencias, destacando la urgencia de generar espacios seguros para la expresión infantil. Este artículo busca transformar la narrativa sobre la violencia infantil, situando a los niños como protagonistas y ofreciendo claves para diseñar estrategias educativas y sociales que realmente respondan a su realidad.

Palabras clave: conflicto; escuela; familia; reacciones; significados; violencia intrafamiliar.

RESUMO

Como as crianças percebem a violência? Indo além de estudos que a analisam a partir de uma perspectiva externa, este artigo se aprofunda em suas próprias vozes, explorando como elas a identificam, interpretam e assimilam em seu ambiente cotidiano. Utilizando uma abordagem interdisciplinar que entrelaça psicologia, pedagogia e análise sociocultural, este artigo examina a construção do significado da violência na infância e os fatores que influenciam sua percepção. Utilizando o modelo ecológico de Bronfenbrenner, o artigo investiga o impacto de diferentes níveis do ambiente -família, escola, comunidade e cultura- na maneira como as crianças compreendem e enfrentam a violência. Também analisa o papel de adultos e instituições na validação ou minimização dessas experiências, destacando a urgência de criar espaços seguros para que as crianças se

expressem. Este artigo busca transformar a narrativa sobre a violência infantil, colocando as crianças como protagonistas e oferecendo chaves para a construção de estratégias educacionais e sociais que realmente respondam à sua realidade.

Palavras-chave: conflito; escola; família; reações; significados; violência doméstica.

INTRODUCTION

The family constitutes the first nucleus of socialization where children experience emotional bonds that shape their worldview. In this primary environment, significant experiences are interwoven that connect the internal dimension with the external context, shaping roles, meanings, and horizons. However, this space can also become the setting for rights violations when domestic violence emerges, a phenomenon that disrupts children's well-being and jeopardizes their overall development.

Numerous studies address domestic violence from psychological, social, cultural, legal, and educational perspectives, seeking to understand its causes and design strategies for addressing them. Despite these advances, significant gaps persist: figures from the National Institute of Forensic Medicine in Colombia (2021) reflect an alarming reality, reporting 1,854 cases in just two months. The magnitude of this problem shows that, despite its institutional recognition, it remains a challenge for public policy, prevention, and the effective protection of children. In this context, it becomes necessary to investigate how children understand and give meaning to these experiences within their daily lives. The research is based on the recognition, as proposed by Conen (2018), that the family is an ecological habitat that fosters affection and supports a child's life course. From this perspective, human development is neither linear nor determined, but rather depends on multiple factors that interact at different times and in different contexts of life.

Recent studies by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO, 2020-2021) highlight that most cases of violence against children occur in the family environment, with 58 % of Latin American children exposed to forms of physical or psychological abuse, neglect, or neglect. These dynamics impact not only children's emotional and physical health, but also their academic performance, generating disruptive behaviors, concentration difficulties, and even school dropouts (Pinargote *et al.*, 2022; Tapullima *et al.*, 2023).

At the theoretical level, the study is based on Bronfenbrenner's (1987) Ecological Systems Theory, which allows for the analysis of how different environments -microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem- influence the construction of meanings about violence. From the immediate family ties to broader cultural and structural factors, each level contributes elements that shape children's perceptions of their reality. Complementarily, the study uses the social constructionist approach proposed by Berger and Luckmann (2003), which posits that reality is not a given fact, but rather a construction developed through language, interaction, and membership in a symbolic community.

Thus, children's interpretation of domestic violence cannot be reduced to an objective or external interpretation, but must be considered from the perspective of the children themselves, who generate meanings from their surroundings and based on their experiences, symbols, emotions, and everyday language. Listening to these children's voices not only allows us to understand their worlds but also opens paths to their transformation.

Within this framework, this article aims to deepen the understanding of the meanings that children ages 6 to 8 construct about domestic violence within the context of a public educational institution. This seeks to make their voices visible, clarify knowledge gaps, and provide pedagogical, social, and cultural tools that enable more effective, respectful, and transformative interventions in their development. Furthermore, it analyzes the role of adults and institutions in validating, minimizing, or transforming these experiences, highlighting the importance of creating safe spaces for children's expression. This work hopes to contribute to a framework for action that favors the development of more effective educational and social policies, grounded in children's voices and testimony.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was framed within a qualitative approach, ideal for exploring social phenomena from the perspective of the subjects themselves, prioritizing an understanding of the meaning they attribute to their everyday experiences. To this end, a hermeneutic-interpretative design was adopted, allowing for in-depth analysis of the discourses in their context, recognizing the meanings that emerge from the participants' experiences.

The sample selected was non-probabilistic and consisted of twelve children between six and eight years of age, students at a public school. This strategy facilitated access to participants whose

experiences were directly related to the phenomenon of interest, thus allowing for the collection of relevant and meaningful data for the purposes of the research.

Focus group data collection was used, chosen for its effectiveness in exploring shared perceptions, social values, and collective constructions of meaning. This methodology encouraged spontaneous dialogue among the children in a safe and controlled space, allowing them to freely express their thoughts, emotions, and interpretations of domestic violence.

The instrument used was carefully designed based on the cognitive, social, and cultural characteristics of the participating children, to ensure adequate understanding of the questions and avoid potential bias. Furthermore, all ethical considerations required for this type of study were respected: informed consent was obtained from the children's legal guardians, and the safety of the children was protected throughout the process.

Data analysis began with an initial organization of the collected narratives, identifying fragments related to domestic violence. Open coding was then applied, allowing the data to be broken down into meaningful units, from which emerging categories were grouped. Subsequently, axial coding was performed, facilitating a more structured organization of the categories, contributing to the interpretation of the meanings children attributed to their experiences within the family context.

RESULTS

In this section, we analyzed the meanings children constructed about domestic violence after conducting the proposed focus group. This approach presents a microanalysis process that results in the distribution of codes. These codes allow us to interpret how children perceive, describe, and react to risky situations at home (Table 1).

Table 1. Code distribution

Codes	Total codes	Family of codes
Sad	22	Reactions to family conflicts
Evil	12	
Cry	6	
I feel	23	
Scared	5	
I don't feel well	5	
Blame	3	
Paste	34	Behaviors related to violence
Shout	5	
Annoying	29	
Profanity	5	
They don't talk to each other	4	
Scold	3	
Silver	1	
They argue- Fight	28	
Separate	5	
Issues	14	
Eat	69	Desired changes in the family
I pray to God	3	
Home	9	
Aid	13	
I defend mom	9	Managing family conflict
Superhero	4	
Dear	4	Self-esteem and school support
Don't fight	7	
Calm	4	
Talking	7	
Tasks	4	

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the analysis of data provided in the focus groups

According to the first set of codes, titled "Children's Reactions to Family Conflicts," the results reflect the diverse situations and emotions experienced in the context of domestic violence. Participants describe their experiences through emotions such as sadness, discomfort, and fear, which frequently appear in situations of conflict within the home. Expressions such as "I feel sad" (Participant 1) or "I start to cry" (Participant 3) reveal how they internalize and express these emotions. These codes point to a direct relationship between family disputes and children's emotional reactions, demonstrating that experiences of conflict profoundly affect their emotional and psychological well-being.

The second family of codes, behaviors related to violence, shows that when parents are upset, they tend to engage in commanding or violent behavior. Participants mentioned behaviors they associate with domestic violence. Most recognized situations involving hitting, yelling, and fighting. Participant 4 stated, "Hitting me. They hit me," which highlights the normalization of physical violence in the home. The economic factor is a relevant aspect in family discussions: "They fight over money" (Participant 1). This implies that the impact of these actions on children is significant, as they witness and participate in the dynamics of domestic violence in their homes.

Consequently, desired changes and solutions within the family are associated, where children express their desire to transform situations of violence that arise in the home and propose various ways to solve family conflicts, such as going out to eat together or praying to God. One child commented, "When I'm scared, I pray to God" (Participant 8), while others highlighted the importance of sharing family activities, such as eating together, to mitigate arguments. These suggestions highlight the importance of promoting harmonious coexistence in the home, where family time and spiritual practices can contribute to reducing tensions and conflicts.

The stories also reveal strategies for managing family conflict; for example, Participant 5 says, "I put my dad on one side and my mom on the other" when they argue. These aspects reveal how significant those attempts at intervention to mitigate discord are, as they reveal conflict management and the emotional impact they cause, establishing a need around parental discord.

On the other hand, they mention that "if there's a fight, he stops it. A superhero stops it" (Participant 12). Superheroes can stop fights, thus reflecting children's desire to intervene externally to solve household problems. From an imaginative and narrative perspective, the powers they grant are associated with positions of authority and control over situations, something ordinary people cannot

do. Therefore, they are attributed with an ideal model who fairly and heroically solves a problem. This suggests that children are inspired by the idea that a superhero can bring about a positive resolution.

Finally, regarding self-esteem and academic support, the importance of good family relationships is emphasized. Specifically, it is mentioned: "Because it is important that everyone in the family treats each other with great care and respect so that they don't fight" (Participant 6) and "No rudeness" (Participant 3). It is worth emphasizing that, both in the family and at school, education is based on the principles of care and respect for others; however, it is evident that there is a contradiction in the use of these teachings, given that the example is inconsistent with everyday discourse.

The following is an organized structure that analyzes complex interactions that allow us to characterize and examine the phenomenon of domestic violence and thereby affirm symbolic facts, such as understanding how children describe and react to risky situations occurring in the home. Given this premise, there are meanings that require interventions from different fronts: education, state policies, and exercises of co-responsibility.

Figure 1 presents five families of codes that describe reactions to family conflicts, behaviors related to violence, desired changes in the family, family conflict management, self-esteem, and school support. This suggests that children's arguments report physical and emotional intensities and frequencies that are recorded and translated into visible behaviors in the different spaces where their daily lives take place. Although family dynamics cannot be broadly identified because they are not the object of study, the existence of acts of violence that are routinely present is determined.

Reactions to family conflicts are closely related to parental behavior and its impact on children, as the relationship of yelling, fighting, and separation is the subject of analysis. The stories shared experiences of physical and emotional violence in a vertical relationship between a man and a woman. They emphasize its severity, given that, in the exercise of these violence, minor children are present and report negative impacts such as fear, guilt, and crying. In contrast, within the microsystem, any hostile environment quickly reproduces sensations and feelings of insecurity that are linked to cognitive and social development, operating in aspects observed such as unfounded fears, feelings of hopelessness, and increased aggression.

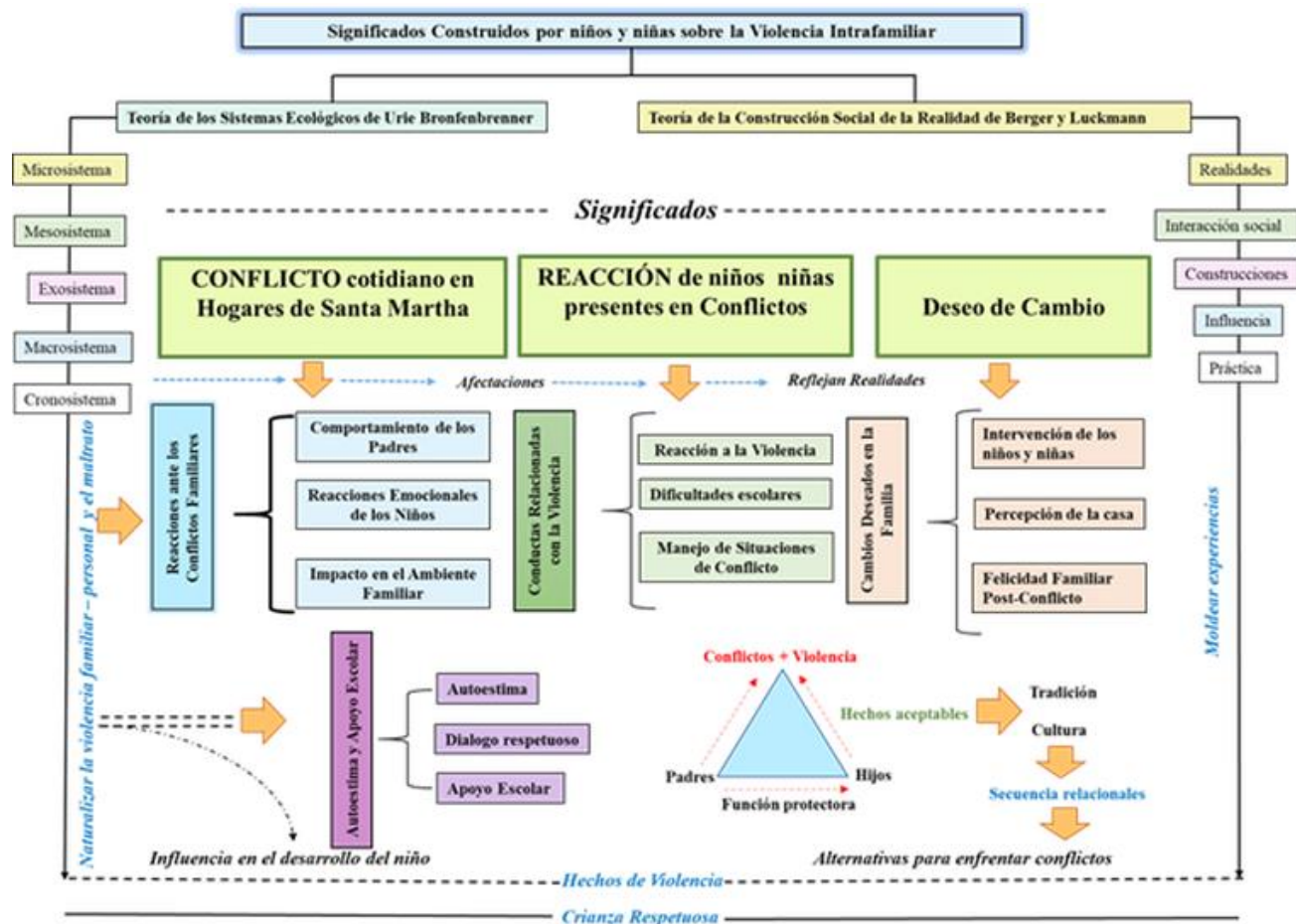


Figure 1. Diagram of the theoretical relationship with the meanings constructed by children about domestic violence

Source: Own elaboration based on data provided in the focus group

Regarding the systemic stance, we analyze the defensive actions children use to protect their mothers, victims of parental violence. This represents an act of safeguarding that, in addition to putting family members at risk, increases confrontation and represents an imminent risk to the family unit. Furthermore, we interpret actions of tangible courage, associated with the mother's safety and well-being. Strictly speaking, we identify a breach of norms in the home, which quickly spreads to the educational environment and, consequently, exacerbates conflicts.

From what has been said, it is worth mentioning that inadequate communication has a striking impact on children's emotional reactions. When adults are in conflict in the presence of their children,

vulnerable practices are rapidly reproduced and spread with profound intensity. As communication is a primary source of experience transmission, and is considered the nucleus where a person can feel most valued, it is possible that problems may be transmitted that harm children as sensitive recipients of knowledge.

In this regard, it is appropriate to return to marital conflict, given that it has been understood that the burden of problems at home is transferred to the children. From a perspective and recognition of the ecological environment, they present significant symptoms at school, such as high levels of rudeness, aggression among peers, and generalized discomfort, which are rooted in the tensions that become naturalized at home and disrupt academic performance.

In addition to the above, regarding the impact on the family environment, chaotic events are reported within the home, which is perceived as highly normal, representing a significant level of disruption. In this regard, it is evident that there is an explosive family environment in most homes, and that emotional events are not taken into account or valued. It is possible to conclude that there is a functional breakdown in the targeted families. This illustrates that the family system has adapted its problem-solving measures through shouting, fighting, and verbal and physical aggression.

This context encompasses the relationships established by the mesosystem, which exemplifies parents who are uncooperative with educators, thus failing to foster a supportive environment that positively impacts the child's well-being. It should also be mentioned that the microsystem reflects a physical environment contaminated by highly provocative and challenging voices from parents, who respond to their children's disorganized and conflictive behaviors.

Regarding behaviors related to violence, it is possible to identify through the children's accounts that parents exhibit behaviors that include the use of violent language, as well as physical and emotional behaviors that are imitated by their children. This context particularly reflects how children, through the narration of events that are part of their daily lives, make efforts to differentiate themselves from these same situations; however, for parents, and especially fathers, it is difficult to control the negative emotions they express. Constructive efforts are initiatives that children undertake in a struggle to defend their mother, because when this occurs, it is counterproductive to ignore the negatively articulated triangle that brings with it a severe increase in mistreatment, neglect, abuse, isolation, manipulation, and coercion, significantly impacting the ways they relate.

The results show that children exposed to contexts and situations of domestic violence tend to react with sadness and fear, manifested through crying and a mood in which they describe themselves as feeling ill. The emotional environment, therefore, is recognized as unstable, insecure, and fearful. Thus, it is considered that in the microsystem, the family fosters a disturbing environment; in the mesosystem, domestic violence is reflected in social interaction at school and, therefore, in academic performance, concentration, and relationship skills.

Children's self-perception is closely related to how their parents perceive them. They feel more accepted at home when they perform household chores, such as washing dishes or sweeping the house, as they believe that by doing so they will contribute to family happiness. Furthermore, they seek acceptance by meeting their parents' expectations, sometimes under the premise that if they do not behave appropriately or do their chores well, they will not be loved by God. Children's self-esteem is strengthened at home through love, kindness, and respect. It is crucial that these aspects be reinforced, both at school and at home, to ensure children's comprehensive and positive development.

To strengthen children's self-esteem, it is crucial to recognize and value their achievements, provide constant support to achieve their goals, and motivate them to improve, even when they fail to meet their expectations. This process of building self-esteem must begin at home, where the actions and support of parents play a fundamental role. Furthermore, school experiences also contribute significantly, as children interact with their peers and teachers in an environment that reinforces their self-belief.

According to the data reported by the participants, there is a desire to indirectly improve self-esteem, when they seek approval and validation of their actions from those around them. In this sense, the meanings provided explain how experiences shape children's perceptions.

Behavioral development in children is primarily acquired through imitation, encompassing both actions and the use of language. For this reason, it is essential that parents and teachers be careful and consistent in their teaching. However, this is undermined when children perceive that their parents adopt aggressive and hostile behaviors stemming from specific events, such as, for example, "My dad pulls my hair" (Participant 1). When an adult, whether a parent or a teacher, acts contrary to what they teach, this has a negative impact on children's learning and emotional development.

DISCUSSION

There are several essential approaches that fuel ongoing reflection on the meanings children construct in a public institution, and which indirectly demand attention. Based on experience in a particular setting, a real life is created, narrated through language as a practical representation of the events that occur in their daily lives. These approaches spark interest, reflection, and criticism in three key aspects: the naturalization of reactions to family conflicts, behaviors related to violence, and desired changes in the family.

Based on the above, the analysis can be developed by summing up the postulates of Berger and Luckmann (2003), who, based on the theory of social construction, explain how tradition structures the ways of valuing, interpreting, and giving meaning to events. This aspect is implicit in the participants' arguments, who consider domestic violence to be a common, normal, and acceptable occurrence, resulting from the shared ways of life within their families. However, this normalization of violence is not an isolated phenomenon. As Luévano (2021) points out, economic and social crises can reinforce patterns of violence in the home, affecting children's perceptions of conflict and family coexistence. In this sense, the study's findings suggest that children not only internalize violence as part of their environment but also develop coping mechanisms that reflect their desire for emotional stability.

From the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's (1987) ecological model, the family microsystem plays a determining role in children's perception of violence. As Bautista Camargo (2021) explains, a child's immediate environment influences their well-being, affecting their attention span, memory, and perception. In this study, children reported that family conflicts affect their concentration in school, confirming the relationship between the emotional environment and academic performance. Furthermore, the mesosystem, which encompasses the interaction between family and school, shows a contradiction between the values promoted in the educational environment and family dynamics. As Pinargote *et al.* (2021) point out, domestic violence has a direct impact on children's academic performance, affecting their motivation and learning capacity.

This finding reinforces the need to develop educational strategies that promote dialogue between families and schools, with the goal of strengthening children's self-esteem and reducing the emotional impact of domestic violence. While this study provides in-depth insight into children's perceptions of domestic violence, there are limitations that must be considered when interpreting the results. The

research was conducted with twelve children from a public school, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. As Muñoz-Cobosa *et al.* (2006) points out, qualitative studies on domestic violence require larger and more diverse samples to capture the complexity of the phenomenon. Although the hermeneutic-interpretative approach allows for a deeper understanding of the meanings constructed by children, the interpretation of the data can be influenced by the researcher's perspective; similarly, as Valdés Barraza *et al.* (2023) warns, subjectivity in qualitative studies on violence can affect the objectivity of the findings, requiring triangulation with other data sources.

Furthermore, this study is based on a single-point analysis of children's perceptions, without assessing how these representations evolve over time. As Pimentel Aguilar (1997) points out, studies on domestic violence require longitudinal monitoring to understand the long-term effects on child development. The meanings that children construct around domestic violence reveal a complex interaction among tradition, culture, and their own critical capacity. Although they have normalized certain violent behaviors as part of their family and community environment, they also express an ethical and moral rejection of them, indicating a dissonance between what is socially accepted and what they perceive as correct.

This finding highlights the need for interventions that not only address violence from a punitive perspective, but also foster children's role as active agents of change, capable of challenging and transforming family dynamics where violence is perpetuated. This opens a window for developing educational and social strategies that promote dialogue and critical reflection within these contexts, facilitating the construction of meanings that support healthier, violence-free family relationships.

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Conflict of interest

Authors declare no conflict of interests.

Authors' contribution

The authors participated in the design and writing of the article, in the search and analysis of the information contained in the consulted bibliography.



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