

**LIFE SKILLS INTERVENTIONS: CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS**

***INTERVENÇÕES EM HABILIDADES DE VIDA: CONTRIBUIÇÕES PARA O DESENVOLVIMENTO PSICOSSOCIAL DE CRIANÇAS E ADOLESCENTES***

***INTERVENCIONES EN HABILIDADES PARA LA VIDA: CONTRIBUCIONES AL DESARROLLO PSICOSOCIAL DE NIÑOS Y ADOLESCENTES***

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**ABSTRACT:** Interventions aimed at children and adolescents that promote healthy psychosocial development are relevant. From this perspective, we highlight those proposed for the development of Life Skills (LS), which are competencies defined by the World Health Organization as fundamental for better dealing with the challenges of daily life, and are allies in promoting the integral health of individuals. Thus, the present study aimed to describe group interventions for the development of LS in children and adolescents carried out in Brazil. An exploratory study was carried out considering only publications in Portuguese. Eight interventions were identified, in which the age of the participants ranged from eight to eighteen years old. The main results observed were the reduction of sexist and homophobic beliefs, positive changes in behavior, contribution to self-knowledge and improvement in interpersonal relationships. We conclude that such interventions are important in positively impacting quality of life as a whole.

**KEYWORDS:** Life skills. Children. Adolescents. Group interventions. Psychosocial development. Health promotion.

**RESUMO:** *Intervenções direcionadas a crianças e adolescentes que promovam o desenvolvimento psicossocial saudável são relevantes. Nessa perspectiva, destacam-se as que têm como proposta o desenvolvimento das Habilidades de Vida (HV), que são competências definidas pela Organização Mundial da Saúde como fundamentais para melhor lidar com os desafios da vida cotidiana, sendo aliadas na promoção da saúde integral dos indivíduos. Desta forma, o presente estudo teve como objetivo descrever intervenções, em grupo, para o desenvolvimento de HV em crianças e adolescentes realizadas no Brasil. Foi feito um estudo exploratório considerando apenas publicações em língua portuguesa. Foram identificadas oito intervenções, nas quais a idade dos participantes variava dos oito aos dezoito anos. Os principais resultados observados foram a redução de crenças sexistas e homofóbicas, mudanças positivas de comportamento, contribuição para o autoconhecimento e melhoria no*

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*relacionamento interpessoal. Conclui-se que tais intervenções são importantes ao impactarem positivamente na qualidade de vida como um todo.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Habilidades de vida. Crianças. Adolescentes. Intervenções grupais. Desenvolvimento psicossocial. Promoção de saúde.*

**RESUMEN:** *Las intervenciones dirigidas a niños y adolescentes que promueven un desarrollo psicossocial saludable son relevantes. Desde esta perspectiva, destacamos las propuestas para el desarrollo de las Habilidades para la Vida (HV), que son competencias definidas por la Organización Mundial de la Salud como fundamentales para afrontar mejor los retos de la vida cotidiana, y son aliadas para promover la salud integral de los individuos. Así, el presente estudio tuvo como objetivo describir las intervenciones grupales para el desarrollo de la HV en niños y adolescentes realizadas en Brasil. Se realizó un estudio exploratorio considerando sólo las publicaciones en portugués. Se identificaron ocho intervenciones, en las que la edad de los participantes oscilaba entre los ocho y los dieciocho años. Los principales resultados observados fueron la reducción de las creencias sexistas y homófobas, los cambios positivos en el comportamiento, la contribución al autoconocimiento y la mejora de las relaciones interpersonales. Concluimos que estas intervenciones son importantes porque tienen un impacto positivo en la calidad de vida en su conjunto.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Habilidades para la vida. Niños. Adolescentes. Intervenciones grupales. Desarrollo psicossocial. Promoción de la salud.*

## Introduction

Interventions aimed at reducing the frequency of behaviours considered socially inappropriate, such as aggressiveness, presented by children and adolescents are widely used, as reported by Bolsoni-Silva *et al.* (2010).

The contribution to the comprehensive development of children and adolescents' health can be made through interventions in Life Skills (LS), which involve social, cognitive and affective skills (MURTA; DEL PRETTE; DEL PRETTE, 2010) that, as highlighted by the World Health Organization (WHO) (1997), help deal with the difficulties that arise in everyday life, promoting psychosocial skills. Several studies point positive results in reducing risk behaviors and increase in competencies directed to health among children and adolescents in programs with this proposal (BOTVIN, 1998; GORAYEB; NETTO; BUGLIANI, 2003; MANGRULKAR; WHITMAN; POSNER, 2001; MINTO *et al.*, 2006).

The World Health Organization (WHO, 1997) understands that LS are behavioural repertoires capable of promoting people who are better able to deal with the challenges and experiences that arise in daily life. Thus, they stimulate and promote psychosocial competence, assisting in the well-being, whether physical, mental or even social of

individuals (WHO, 1997), through interpersonal skills (WHO, 2003). Also according to the WHO (1997), there are ten competencies listed, which are divided into five basic areas: decision-making and problem solving; creative thinking and critical thinking; communication and interpersonal skills; selfknowledge and empathy; and finally, dealing with emotions and dealing with stress (WHO, 1999).

Currently, as Cunha and Rodrigues (2010) point out, there are several daily challenges that can generate high levels of stress, which affects individuals regardless of their age group. In order to deal with such issues that require a more expressive cognitive flexibility, it is necessary both to face the situations that generate stress and to develop skills for this purpose.

The theme becomes even more relevant when thinking about facing the pandemic of COVID-19. This atypical and stressful event caused people to confine themselves in their homes, coupled with the fear of contracting the virus. On average, one third of people affected by this event, if there is no prompt and correct intervention, as data from the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (FIOCRUZ) (2020a) show, may have psychological manifestations, in which children and adolescents are also impacted.

Although the mortality rate is not so significant in this age group, the pandemic had a great impact on the routine life of children and adolescents, with the closure of schools, significantly increasing the time they spend at home, combined with the loss of social interaction (FIOCRUZ, 2020b). Many are the expected reactions presented by children during the pandemic period, such as "difficulties in concentration, irritability, fear, restlessness, boredom, feeling of loneliness, changes in sleep and eating patterns" (FIOCRUZ, 2020b, p. 4, our translation). Thus, the indirect effects of the pandemic can be as harmful as the direct ones, since there are losses associated with formal education and socialization, for example.

In this context, with the presence of several stressful variables, the development of LS can help. This hypothesis arises because, according to the WHO (1997), the teaching of LS increases psychosocial competence, thus helping to promote health. According to Cunha and Rodrigues (2010), this competence is relevant because it promotes the development of personal characteristics with a positive and more adaptive nature, being able to promote psychological health through resources such as resilience.

From this perspective, early interventions aimed at developing LS with children and adolescents are crucial given that their lifestyles, habits, among other aspects of their personality, are still in a constant process of transformation and development. Thus, children and adolescents are more receptive, flexible and susceptible to change (RODRIGUES *et al.*, 2008).

Murta, Del Prette, and Del Prette (2010) point out how training in social skills, as well as in life skills, can be important to prevent sexism and heterosexism. It is also expected that, based on the use of such skills, adolescents may, for example, avoid teenage pregnancy, developing a safer sexual behaviour, preventing sexually transmitted infections (STDs), as stated by the United Nations (UN) (2006), and HIV/AIDS, as worked in Thailand and Zimbabwe (WHO, 1999). Studies also indicate that the development of LS enhances the promotion of self-esteem and self-confidence, preventing bullying (MARYAM *et al.*, 2011; SUPARP, 2010).

As explained by Botvin and Griffin (2004), LS can act as a strategy to reduce risk behaviours, promoting not only physical health care, but also an increase in psychological wellbeing, thus acting as protective factors against substance use among young people. This denotes their great value in interventions involving children and adolescents for the promotion of health and psychosocial development.

Thus, the present study aims to identify interventions directed at children and adolescents for the development of LS carried out in Brazil, identifying their characteristics, strategies, and results. Thus, an exploratory study was conducted based on a bibliographic search.

With the exception of Neufeld *et al.* (2014), whose work stimulated the interest in seeking more publications on the topic, giving rise to this research, and was included in the same study, publications were searched in the *Google Scholar* database for its breadth, using the following search descriptors: *life skills, life skills and children, life skills and adolescents, life skills and children, life skills and adolescents*, using the Boolean operator AND between the descriptors. Data collection took place in June 2021, and the inclusion criteria were papers in Portuguese, conducted in Brazil, with children and/or adolescents, and that included the concept of LS as promulgated by the WHO (1997). The period selected for the collection covered publications carried out in the last 20 years. Thus, at the end, eight interventions that met the research requirements were identified.

### **LS interventions with children and adolescents in Brazil**

An intervention with adolescents was carried out between 2001 and 2003 by the Health Promotion in the Community Program of the Hospital das Clínicas of the Ribeirão Preto Medical School at the University of São Paulo (HCFMRP/USP). It took place in a state school by Minto *et al.* (2006) and aimed to promote health, seeking to positively impact the

quality of life of students. There were 12 sessions with an average duration of two hours each. All LS were addressed, being worked one per session, describing which techniques were used to develop the skills. They concluded that the intervention was adequate, being perceptible through the participants' reports, that it helped in the self-knowledge, reflection and interpersonal relationship. Thus, it corroborated the data described in the literature, since it provided the development of skills that help in issues arising in everyday life.

In her master's thesis, Minto (2005) reports on the experience of a LS program, during 2003 and 2004, for the promotion of health and prevention of risky behaviors, such as drinking, smoking and unprotected sexual behavior, among adolescents between 14 and 17 years old. The intervention took place in two institutions, also in Ribeirão Preto. Most of the participants, among the 45 in the project, were male. In the quantitative analysis there were no significant differences before and after the intervention, in which drinking and smoking were above the national average. However, in the qualitative analysis, positive results were identified in which LS related to self-control helped to deal with stressful situations involving the family, school, and social context.

Murta *et al.* (2009) present in their article positive results from a LS pre-experimental design programme with eighteen adolescents aged between 12 and 14 years, most of whom were female. There were sixteen sessions held at a university, lasting approximately 90 minutes over five months. Together with the LS, other themes were also worked, such as health risks associated with gender, social support network and relapse prevention, as well as training techniques in social skills and Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT), through group experiences. The effectiveness of the intervention was positive, which was based on the insight of adolescents and their caregivers. Most of the intermediate goals were achieved, given the participants' satisfaction with the meetings, as well as the practice of skills.

Murta *et al.* (2009) report that all participants were satisfied with the programme, given that one year after the end of the intervention they reported having had no contact with licit or illicit substance use, STDs or pregnancy. There was a worsening in the school performance of three students, however, it would be necessary a detailed investigation to better understand this event. The overall results point to a relevant constitution of protective factors that can help deal with the challenges experienced in their lives.

Demonstrating how multiple are the themes that can be worked with LS, Murta *et al.* (2012) report the experience of a programme aimed at promoting interpersonal skills, sexual and reproductive rights for adolescents. The participants were 93 adolescents, male and female, between 12 and 17 years old from a public elementary school in Goiânia. They were

held in 15 sessions lasting an average of 90 minutes. Based on themes such as dating violence, violence against women and resources for self-protection, they worked on LS such as interpersonal relationships, empathy, dealing with stress and problem solving. Despite pointing out changes that would be relevant to be made in order to make better use of the program, such as changes in the order of the sessions, and the inclusion of written evaluation measures in detriment to the oral modality, positive aspects of the experience are also highlighted. This is because there was an acceptance among the adolescents, i.e., they were receptive to discussing the proposed topics, an aspect of great importance for the success of an intervention. They also point out how there was acceptance to address topics related to sexuality, gender and sexual rights, generating significant engagement, different from what is pointed out in the literature.

In another study, Murta *et al.* (2013) used the LS to work with adolescents to prevent violence in romantic relationships, such as dating, as well as sexist and homophobic beliefs.

This is a quasi-experimental study with 60 students from a public school in Brasília, aged 14-18 years. An interview was also conducted five months after the intervention. It was noticed that among those who participated in the program, there were positive changes regarding sexist and homophobic answers, with a decrease in such answers. However, there was no statistically significant difference in the intention of coping with dating violence in the group that underwent the intervention, in relation to the group that was not exposed, in which growth was noted in the negotiation, as for the way the relationship is established, both affectively and sexually. A decrease in resignation was also noted.

The Cognitive-Behavioral Life Skills Program for Children and Adolescents (PRHAVIDA) is a LS-based intervention carried out in Brazil and still in activity, developed by Neufeld *et al.* (2014), being aimed at children and adolescent students of a municipal school in the countryside of São Paulo. The reported intervention took place with children between eight and nine years and adolescents between 12 and 13 years. The participants had heterogeneous scores in social skills, depression, stress and anxiety, which demonstrates a look at the mental health of the participants, who belonged to both males and females.

The program of Neufeld *et al.* (2014) was structured in 11 weekly group sessions, with pre- and post-test interventions. In addition to working on all LSs, the development of Social Skills was also included. Results were found to be positive, with participants reporting appreciation for the group in qualitative evaluation sessions at the end. Program participants' relationships with each other improved over the course of the sessions, as well as positive behavior change was noticeable from participants and therapists themselves.

Franco (2014) developed a quasi-experimental study for the development of LS and Social Skills among socially vulnerable male adolescents. The mean age of the participants was 12.8 years and they attended a philanthropic institution in the state of Minas Gerais. There were 12 weekly meetings lasting 60 minutes each, and the results were positive, as they acquired, for example, positive behaviors in social interactions, where the most prominent CVs were interpersonal relationships, effective communication, decision making, empathy, and creative thinking, as these were evidenced by the adolescents as the most practiced by them in their daily lives. There were also indirect effects on the well-being of young people and direct effects on the social skill of civility.

More recently and going against what has been observed in the literature, as in Paiva and Rodrigues (2008), Nadaleti *et al.* (2018) presented a quasi-experimental study that addressed the LS model as a prevention of substance use among adolescents. The intervention was conducted in a public school in the state of Minas Gerais, with 78 participants aged between ten and 15 years. Nadaleti *et al.* (2018) concluded that the application of the program was appropriate, helping, for example, to increase the recognition of risk factors and acting in the development of adolescents' skills, despite the limitation related to the small number of participants in the study.

It was possible to observe that the interventions reported here have similar aspects. Although the age of the participants ranged from eight to 18 years, most of them, with the exception of Neufeld *et al.* (2014), were aimed at adolescents. By hypothesis, it is believed that this characteristic should occur due to possible difficulties encountered when developing the theme of LS with younger audiences. This is because working with children makes greater demands on the administrators, as playful aspects are required to be more present. It is also noted that the themes chosen for the research were directed to experiences more conceived during adolescence, such as the use of psychoactive substances, by Nadaleti *et al.* (2018), and the promotion of sexual and reproductive rights, by Murta *et al.* (2012), which would explain the focus on a certain age group.

All interventions occurred in groups, since the group experience allows, in addition to reaching several people simultaneously, many of the discussed skills to be put into practice through the exchange between participants. The minimum duration observed was 60 minutes, going up to 120 minutes, in which half of the interventions, being Murta *et al.* (2009), Murta *et al.* (2013), Neufeld *et al.* (2014) and Franco (2014), included sessions after the completion of the group experiences. This data collection took place in the programs as a whole, through qualitative instruments, such as interviews.

Several times the themes addressed were not limited to LS, but also included social skills, as seen in Murta *et al.* (2009), Murta *et al.* (2012), Neufeld *et al.* (2014) and Franco (2014). Many of the studies dealt with different themes, which demonstrates the great value of interventions involving LS, since, as previously mentioned, they can be useful for different objectives. However, it is important to note that all of them addressed, directly or indirectly, the issue related to health promotion.

Based on what has been demonstrated, the relevance of LS interventions is highlighted, given that their assumptions can be adapted to the most diverse demands, with beneficial results. In addition, its positive impact on the psychosocial development of children and adolescents is noteworthy, as observed in Brazil, even in the face of the still not very expressive number of publications on the theme, which denotes the need for further research in the area.

### **Final considerations**

The development of children and adolescents is crossed by several aspects that need to be considered, such as those of social and economic nature, as well as the family environment in which one is inserted and the practices adopted in it. Thus, it is relevant to develop ways to positively impact the younger audience, since when working with children and adolescents, in the early development of skills, it is expected to be acting in attitudes and decisions that they will have as adults.

From this perspective, it is necessary to focus on studies aimed at teaching LS, as they seek to impact on healthier choices, providing a decrease in risk behaviors, such as substance abuse and unsafe sexual behavior. Therefore, interventions in LS, especially in group settings, are considered of great relevance because, among their various benefits, they stimulate social contact and coexistence, in which it becomes possible to practice the skills discussed in the group itself.

In Brazil, there are still not many studies involving LS interventions with children and adolescents. However, from the exploratory research conducted here, it becomes evident the benefits that such interventions provided, since, in all the programs found, it was possible to observe positive aspects of the experiences, especially considering qualitative data, from the reports of the participants, as well as from caregivers. Moreover, the maintenance of improvements are pointed out, even in follow-up interviews.



We conclude that investments in interventions that work with LS are necessary and relevant, since they can be inserted into various contexts and address different themes. These interventions are beneficial, especially for children and adolescents, given their positive reverberation on psychosocial development, promoting an improvement in quality of life as a whole. In addition, the importance of working these skills beyond the school environment is emphasized, where the focus has been on ways to reach children and adolescents in other contexts.

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