

PARENTING ALLIANCE AMONG MOTHERS OF PSYCHOSOCIALLY AT-RISK FAMILIES

ALIANÇA PARENTAL EM MÃES DE FAMÍLIAS EM RISCO PSICOSSOCIAL

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ABSTRACT

Parenting alliance is the degree of commitment and cooperation present between a mother and father in raising their child, and its lack has been linked to inadequate parenting practices and subsequent negative developmental outcomes for the child. Supportive coparenting after relationship dissolution is associated with increased paternal involvement. At-risk families are much more likely to experience relationship dissolutions; therefore, it is especially important to study parenting alliance in such families. This study analyzes the parenting alliance of 80 mothers of families at psychosocial risk with their children's father, and its relationship with several socio-economic, family, couple and child-related variables using the Parenting Alliance Inventory and a socio-demographic questionnaire. The results showed lower parenting alliance scores in at-risk mothers than those reported in community samples and a negative association between parenting alliance and number of children. Moreover, mothers of one-parent, unstable, separated or divorced families showed significantly lower levels of parenting alliance than their counterparts. These findings highlight the need to include the strengthening of parenting alliance as the primary aim of psycho-educational interventions in at-risk families, especially in the many families in which the parents are no longer a couple.

Keywords: Parenting Alliance, Coparenting, At-risk Families, Psychosocial risk.

RESUMO

A aliança parental avalia o grau de compromisso e de cooperação entre os pais na educação dos seus filhos e a sua ausência tem sido associada a práticas parentais inadequadas e a consequências negativas no desenvolvimento infantil. Uma aliança parental sólida após a separação conjugal está associada a um maior envolvimento do pai na educação da criança. As famílias em risco têm uma maior probabilidade de viver separações conjugais, pelo que é especialmente importante estudar esta variável neste grupo. Neste estudo analisámos os níveis de aliança parental de 80 mães de famílias em risco psicossocial com o pai dos seus filhos e a sua associação a diferentes variáveis socioeconómicas, familiares, do casal e do menor. Utilizámos o *Parental Alliance Inventory* e um questionário de dados sociodemográficos. Observaram-se níveis de aliança parental inferiores aos de amostras comunitárias e uma associação negativa entre a aliança parental e o número de filhos. As mães de famílias monoparentais, instáveis, separadas ou divorciadas apresentaram uma aliança parental significativamente inferior. Estes resultados apontam para a necessidade de incluir o reforço da aliança parental como objetivo nas intervenções psico-educativas com famílias em risco, especialmente em famílias numerosas e quando ambos progenitores já não são um casal.

Palavras-Chave: Aliança Parental, Coparentalidade, Famílias em Risco, Risco Psicossocial.

JEL Classification: I30

1. INTRODUCTION

Appropriate parenting requires both parents to coordinate their parenting objectives, styles and strategies to convey coherent expectations and values to their children (Grych, 2002). Parents' ability to communicate, cooperate and manage conflicts plays a crucial role in effective parenting. Although marital and coparenting relations are closely intertwined, these concepts are not synonymous because the coparenting system involves a third element that affects the nature of parents' interactions – the child (Grych, 2002).

These emotional and evaluative aspects of marital support have been referred to as parenting alliance (Floyd & Zmich, 1991; Weissman & Cohen, 1985). Abidin and Brunner (1995) define parenting alliance as the extent to which parents appreciate, respect and value the parenting and opinions of their spouses. Parenting alliance encompasses the interpersonal components of the parenting role, such as coordination, help and mutual trust between a man and a woman as parents. The parenting alliance is established when each parent invests in the child, values the other parent's involvement, respects his or her judgment and desires to communicate with him or her about child-related matters (Weissman & Cohen, 1985). Therefore, parenting alliance is the degree of commitment and cooperation present between the mother and the father in raising a child and is an aspect of marriage distinct from its romantic and sexual dimensions (Abidin & Brunner, 1995).

Considering the significant number of divorced parents and blended families, assessing parenting alliance is useful because it measures men and women's success as parents, not as a couple. Weissman and Cohen (1985) suggested that if a solid parenting alliance exists, parents could continue to raise their children adequately after a divorce or during a conflictive marriage. Therefore, an adequate assessment of parenting alliance is important because it indicates parents' ability to cooperate with each other to meet their child's needs (Abidin & Brunner, 1995). Floyd, Gilliom and Costigan's (1998) study supports the empirical distinction between marital quality and parenting alliance. In their study, parenting alliance mediated the effects of marital quality on parenting experiences (such as perceived parenting competence and negative parent-child interactions). These results also suggest that marital functioning influences parenting practices through parenting alliance.

Several studies have noted the influence of parenting alliance on a couple's marriage. For instance, one of the predictors of change in marital satisfaction is mutual support in parenting-related tasks. Belsky and Hsieh (1998) investigated the role of personality, task division and coparenting in marital satisfaction, especially the role that these factors played in differentiating couples whose marital satisfaction decreased from those who stayed satisfied. The proportion of non-supportive coparenting (e.g., a parent comforting a child after the other parent had punished him/her) was the only factor that distinguished these two groups. Furthermore, Block, Block and Morrison (1981) found that parental divergences in child educational practices were linked to subsequent marital separation, externalized behavior problems in boys and internalized behavior problems in girls.

Frequent marital conflict may be associated with inadequate parenting and negative developmental outcomes for the child because these conflicts diminish the availability of parental support, an important resource in child-rearing (Wilson & Gottman, 2002). For example, Finger, Hans, Bernstein and Cox (2009) observed that conflictive marital relationships were associated with problematic maternal behavior, lower maternal sensitivity and an insecure and disorganized mother-child attachment. However, in the case of two-parent families, the associations between marital conflict and child attachment were buffered by the family structure. In addition, Frosch, Mangelsdorf and McHale (1998) found that hostility between parents during family play at 6 months postpartum predicted a less secure mother-child attachment and that marital conflict three years postpartum was associated

with a less secure parent-child bond. Similarly, Belsky and Volling (1987) observed that high levels of positive behavior between parents (such as sharing leisure moments, showing affection and exchanging mutual compliments) were significantly associated with positive and responsive parental behaviors.

This “spill-over effect”—the continuity between the affective tone of the marital dyad and the parents-child triad—was also found by Kitzmann (2000). In her study, negativity in the marital dyad was associated with less democratic coparenting. This negativity was also associated with parents’ behavior, specifically to more negative and less affectionate and supportive parents-child interactions. However, this process may differ by gender. Belsky, Youngblade, Rovine and Olling (1991) found stronger negative associations between marital relationship deterioration and positive parenting among men. When the quality of the marriage was diminishing, men tended to engage in more negative and intrusive behaviors towards their three-year-old child, and the child was more disobedient to his/her father. Among women, however, the results indicated the existence of a compensatory process in their relationship with their children (i.e., when the marital relationship deteriorated they tended to invest more in the child).

Because supportive coparenting after relationship dissolution is associated with increased paternal involvement (which buffers the negative effects of parental relationship dissolution) and because low-income, at-risk families are more likely to experience relationship dissolution, supportive coparenting after separation is particularly important in these families. The results from several studies have shown that parenting alliance influences parents’ behavior toward children who are biologically and psychosocially at-risk (Floyd & Zmich, 1991; Rodrigo, Martín, Máiquez, & Rodríguez, 2007). Parenting alliance also influences fathers’ involvement in child-raising and education-related activities (McBride & Rane, 1998). To study psychosocially at-risk families, Jones, Forehand, Dorsey, Foster and Brody (2005) examined the effects of coparent support and conflict on mother and child adjustment in 248 low-income, African American, single-mother-headed families and found that coparent conflict was a more robust predictor of mother and child maladjustment than coparent support. Specifically, coparent relationships characterized by high levels of support and low levels of conflict were associated with the highest levels of parental monitoring behavior, whereas coparent relationships characterized by low levels of support and high levels of conflict were associated with the lowest levels of monitoring. Dorsey, Forehand, and Brody (2007), examined the relationship between conflict between the mother and the primary co-caregiver and parenting practices in single-parent, economically disadvantaged African American families. The authors observed that conflict with a co-caregiver was significantly related to parenting, both directly and indirectly through maternal psychological distress. The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study was a longitudinal examination of whether relationship characteristics (commitment and quality) and child characteristics (i.e., difficult temperament and gender) predicted initial levels of and change in supportive coparenting after relationship dissolution (Kamp Dush, Kotila, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011). The authors found that, overall, supportive coparenting decreased over time, and mothers who reported that their child was more difficult had significantly lower initial levels of supportive coparenting. These results suggest that parents’ relationship characteristics are important predictors of supportive coparenting, both initially and over time.

Although the importance of parenting alliance is demonstrated by its association with parenting behaviors and subsequent child development outcomes, it appears that this dimension has not yet been studied in at-risk Portuguese families. Therefore, the aims of this study are:

1. To analyze the socio-demographic profile of families with at-risk minors from the Algarve;

2. To study the association between parenting alliance and couple, family, minor and socio-educational-work-related variables (see Table 1);
3. To determine whether there are significant differences in parenting alliance scores according to couple, family, minor and socio-educational-work-related variables (see Table 1).

Table 1. Classification of the socio-demographic variables

Variables			
Couple	Family	Minor	Socio-educational-work
Length of relationship with spouse	Type of family	Age	Educational level
Marital status	Family stability	Gender	Family income
Who performs parental role	Number of children		Work situation
	Number of minors living in the household		
	Number of people living in the household		

2. METHOD

Participants

The participants included 80 Portuguese mothers from the Algarve who were parenting at least one psychosocially at-risk minor. The sample selection criteria required participants 1) To have at least one minor in the household and 2) To be experiencing several problems and risk situations (such as work problems or financial strain) that, although a risk for the children, were not severe enough to remove the child from the family of origin. The professionals (social workers and psychologists) at the institutions in which the minors were enrolled identified mothers who met the inclusion criteria and invited them to participate in the study.

Participants were 39.14 years old on average ($SD = 9.48$, Range = 19-70). Most of the mothers had a low educational level (61.25% had not attended school or had not completed elementary school). Most of the families were stable (87.5%), i.e., without recent changes in their composition, and two-parent (75%). The majority of participants were married or in a *de facto* union (77.5%) (Tables 2 and 3).

Measures

- Socio-demographic data questionnaire (Nunes, Lemos, Ayala Nunes, & Costa, 2013). This questionnaire gathers socio-demographic, family, educational, financial and work-related information.
- Parenting Alliance Inventory (PAI; Abidin & Brunner, 1995). This 20-item instrument assesses parenting alliance, defined as the extent to which one parent believes that he/she has a good, supportive, trusting and functional relationship with the other parent. Each of the PAI items asks the parent to respond on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Agree*) to 5 (*Strongly Disagree*). The instrument is applicable regardless of the parents' current marital status and the parental figure's biological relationship to the child. The Cronbach's alpha of this sample ($\alpha = .97$) was identical to the one reported by the authors of the instrument.

Procedure

Institutions that serve at-risk minors (e.g., *Comissão de Protecção de Crianças e Jovens*, *Cruz Vermelha Portuguesa*, *Associação Uma Porta Amiga*, *Programa de Erradicação do Trabalho Infantil*) were contacted and asked to collaborate in this study. All of the institutions contacted agreed to participate. After establishing a collaboration protocol with these institutions, mothers who met the inclusion criteria were asked to participate by the professionals assigned to their cases. The mothers who agreed to participate signed an informed consent form stating that they could terminate their participation at any moment without negative consequences for them or their children. Data anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed.

The instruments were administered in an individual interview by a trained interviewer, and participants took approximately 20 minutes to complete both questionnaires. Three of the participants reported not having any contact with the biological father of their children; therefore, they did not complete the PAI. Half of the interviews took place in the institutions' facilities and the other half took place in the participants' homes.

Statistical analysis

For the descriptive statistics, the percentage distribution of the qualitative variables and the mean, standard deviation and range of the quantitative variables are presented. The correlations were analyzed using Pearson's r coefficient. The statistical assumptions for parametric analysis could not be met (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007) because of the small group size. However, non-parametric tests (*Mann-Whitney* and *Kruskal-Wallis* tests) were used to perform inter-group comparisons. When significant differences between the groups were observed, Pearson's r coefficient was used in the *Mann-Whitney* test to determine the effect size. Mean multiple comparison was used in the *Kruskal-Wallis* test to identify groups that differed significantly from each other. The statistical analyses were performed using PASW® v-18 (Predictive Analytics Software).

3. RESULTS

Socio-demographic data

As Table 2 shows, most of the participants had precarious job situation,s in addition to a low education level: 60% were unemployed, and of those who had a job, 75% were low-qualified. Half of the participants were receiving a form of welfare aid to supplement the income obtained from their own or their spouse's job. Furthermore, 72.34% of participants lived below the national poverty line.

Table 2. Socio-demographic data

	n	%
Education level		
No education/Elementary school incomplete	49	61.25
Elementary school	21	26.25
High school	8	10.00
University	2	2.50
Family stability		
Stable	70	88.61
Unstable	9	11.39
Type of family		
One-parent	13	16.25
Two-parent	36	45.00
Extended	21	26.25
Blended	10	12.50
Job situation		
Employed	32	40.00
Unemployed	48	60.00
Job qualification		
Low	24	75.00
Medium	6	18.75
High	2	6.25
Source of income		
Work	36	45.00
Work and social welfare	40	50.00
Social welfare	4	5.00
Poverty¹		
Poor	34	72.34
Non-poor	13	27.66

¹ Information about participants' family income was only available for 47 subjects.

Parenting alliance and socio-demographic characteristics

Parenting alliance showed a significant negative association only with the number of children variable ($r = -.27$; $p = .016$); mothers who had more children reported lower parenting alliance scores. Noticeably, parenting alliance was associated neither with the number of years the participant had been in a relationship with her spouse ($r = .06$; $p = .662$) nor with the number of children living in the household ($r = .217$, $p = .058$). The range of the parenting alliance scores was high, with a minimum of 20 points and a maximum of 100 points ($SD = 22.90$). The mean score was 72.08 points.

Table 3. Correlation matrix between parenting alliance and socio-demographic dimensions

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Parenting alliance	-	.058	-.158	-.124	-.273*	.207	.217	.036
2. Years of relationship		-	.522***	.383**	.059	.203	-.163	.046
3. Participants' age			-	.496***	.236*	.086	-.270*	.201
4. Minors' age				-	.146	-.061	-.340**	.352*
5. Number of children					-	.324**	.327**	-.150
6. People in the household						-	.592***	-.214
7. Minors in the household							-	-.171
8. Family income								-
M	72.08	16.77	39.14	13.46	2.85	4.69	2.03	838.62
SD	22.90	11.94	9.48	4.12	1.68	1.59	1.11	462.59
Range	20-100	1-49	19-70	1-19	1-10	2-10	0-5	200-2200

* $p \leq 0,05$ ** $p \leq 0,01$ *** $p \leq 0,001$

We assessed whether the following factors yielded significant differences in PAI scores: family type (one-parent/two-parent, nuclear one-parent/nuclear two-parent, extended or blended), stability (stable, unstable), minor's gender, work situation (employed, unemployed), poverty situation (poor, non-poor), education level (did not attend school or did not complete elementary school, elementary school, high school, university), marital status (married/de facto union, separated/divorced or single) and parental figure (whether the person who fulfilled the father role was the biological father and the participant's spouse, only the child's biological father or only the participants' spouse) (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3. Comparison of means and standard deviations of Parenting Alliance scores according to family type, family stability, minors' gender, work situation and poverty situation (Mann-Whitney test)

		Groups		<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>
Parenting Alliance	One-parent (N = 20)	Two-parent (N = 60)		216.50	.000
	51.88 (23.19)	77.80 (18.60)			
	Stable family (N = 70)	Unstable family (N = 9)		170.50	.035
	73.96 (21.22)	55.00 (26.32)			
	Boy (N = 53)	Girl (N = 27)		609.50	.564
	73.31 (22.37)	69.65 (23.52)			
	Employed (N = 32)	Unemployed (N = 48)		676.50	.766
	72.45 (22.05)	72.30 (23.19)			
Poor (N = 32)	Non-poor (N = 12)		161.00	.414	
72.66 (21.71)	67.75 (20.84)				

The results showed significant differences in Parenting Alliance scores according to family type ($U = 216.50$; $z = -3.61$; $p = .000$; $r = -.41$), which had a moderate effect size. Mothers from two-parent families showed higher Parenting Alliance scores than their counterparts from one-parent families. There were also significant differences in Parenting Alliance scores between stable and unstable families ($U = 170.50$; $z = -2.11$; $p = .04$; $r = -.24$); mothers of unstable families showed lower levels of Parenting Alliance, though the effect size was small (Table 3). No differences in Parenting Alliance scores were caused by minor's gender, mothers' work status or poverty status.

Table 4. Comparison of means and standard deviations of Parenting Alliance scores according to family type, marital status, parenting figure and education level (Kruskal-Wallis test)

		Groups		<i>H</i>	<i>P</i>	
Parenting Alliance	Nuclear one-parent (N = 13)	Nuclear two-parent (N = 36)	Extended (N = 21)	Blended (N = 10)	13.94	.003
	47.55 (17.68)	77.44 (18.10)	73.25 (26.66)	77.40 (21.51)		
		Married/De facto union (N = 62)	Separated/Div. (N = 13)	Single (N = 3)	8.84	.012
		76.07 (20.20)	58.82 (20.97)	46.67 (46.18)		
		Father and spouse (N = 46)	Only father (N = 22)	Only spouse (N = 9)	17.38	.000
	79.26 (18.04)	53.27 (21.76)	81.33 (14.64)			
	Elementary school inc. (N = 47)	Elementary school (N = 21)	High school (N = 7)	University (N = 2)	2.95	.400
	70.00 (24.82)	76.24 (20.30)	79.86 (13.27)	50.00 (15.56)		

To further explore the differences in Parenting Alliance among family types, we developed a more detailed classification of the participants' families, dividing them into four categories: nuclear one-parent, nuclear two-parent, extended and blended. As shown in Table 4, significant differences were also found in Parenting Alliance scores when this classification was applied ($\chi^2_{KW}(3) = 13.94; p = .003; N = 77$). A multiple comparisons of mean ranks test was performed. The results showed that mothers of one-parent nuclear families had significantly lower PAI scores than those from nuclear two-parent ($p = .000$), extended ($p = .001$) and blended ($p = .003$) families. However, no differences were found among the latter three types of families.

Marital status also yielded significant differences in the mean PAI scores ($\chi^2_{KW}(2) = 8.84; p = .012; N = 77$). According to the multiple comparisons of mean ranks test, participants who were married or in a *de facto* union showed significantly higher levels of PAI than separated/divorced participants and single mothers (Table 4). However, no significant differences were observed between separated/divorces mothers and single mothers ($p = .193$), possibly due to the small size of the single mothers group ($N = 3$).

As shown in Table 4, there are significant differences between the parental figure PAI scores ($\chi^2_{KW}(2) = 17.38; p = .000; N = 77$). A multiple comparisons of mean ranks test revealed that when the father of the participant's child was not her spouse, PAI scores were significantly lower than when the father of the child was also the participant's spouse ($p = .000$) or when the spouse was not the biological father of the child ($p = .003$).

4. DISCUSSION

The first aim of the study was to analyze the socio-demographic profile of families with at-risk minors from the Algarve. The results showed that this is an especially vulnerable group because such families live in precarious economic, employment and educational conditions. These factors may hinder access to social rights that guarantee full participation in society (Raya, 2004). The high rates of unemployment, low-qualified jobs, poverty and low education levels among this population constitute serious risk factors that jeopardize the development and wellbeing of children growing up in these families and demands attention from political decision-makers and civil society.

Our strengths-focused approach considers more than the risk factors that these families face. In fact, some of their characteristics may act as protective factors that can, to some extent, buffer the effects of the risk factors mentioned above. For example, a significant percentage of these families are intact; most of them are two-parent and stable. In addition, only a small portion of the participants depends exclusively on social welfare as a source of income. Although these families may have some characteristics or resources that mitigate the negative effects of the risk factors they face, it must be emphasized that this population is vulnerable and has a critical need for economic and emotional support (Menéndez, Hidalgo, Jiménez, Lorence, & Sánchez, 2010; Nunes et al., 2011).

The parenting alliance levels reported by the participants were lower than those observed by Abidin and Brunner (1995) in a community sample and slightly lower than those found by Hidalgo, Menéndez, Sánchez, Lorence, and Jiménez (2009) and Menéndez and colleagues (2010) in a psychosocial risk sample. Hidalgo and colleagues (2009) compared parenting alliance among at-risk mothers to that among community mothers and found that the former group showed lower parenting alliance scores.

Therefore, the results suggest that participants in our study do not receive adequate support from their spouses in child-rearing and parenting-related tasks. However, these results should be interpreted with caution because the PAI has not yet been validated in a Portuguese population or an at-risk population.

Nevertheless, the finding that marital relationships tend to be less satisfactory and less supportive in disadvantaged populations has been found previously (Magnuson & Duncan, 2002). Some authors have posited that economic pressure may hinder couples' relationships and coparenting, making it harder for these parents to raise their children together (Brody et al., 1994; Simons, Lorenz, Wu, & Conger, 1993). This may contribute to participants' low parenting alliance levels. A more detailed investigation should be conducted to determine which factors predict parenting alliance in at-risk parents. Such an investigation should include fathers' perspectives about marital quality and parenting alliance because it would be useful to compare fathers' and mothers' perspectives.

Parenting alliance was inversely associated with number of children. This finding is consistent with the results of Twenge, Campbell and Foster (2003), which indicated a negative association between marital satisfaction and number of children. Several studies have found that marital satisfaction diminishes after the birth of children (Belsky, Lang, & Rovine, 1985; Cowan et al., 1985; Ruble, Fleming, Hackel, & Stangor, 1988). There are many reasons for this decline. First, children introduce additional stress into a couple's relationship. The birth of a baby may cause role-related conflicts and restrict individual freedom (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Lavee, Sharlin, & Katz, 1996).

Second, the responsibilities of parenting can interfere with marital intimacy because the number of tasks and pressures increase after the birth of a child (Anderson, Russell, & Schumm, 1983; McHale, 1995). These responsibilities have negative consequences on couples' companionship and sex life (White, 1983). According to Frank, Hole, Jacobson, Justkowski and Huyck (1986) and O'Brien and Peyton (2002), parenting alliance-related measures are closely associated with those of marital intimacy, which has a tendency to diminish during the first three years following a child's birth, regardless of whether that child is the couple's first (O'Brien & Peyton, 2002).

Therefore, it is possible that as the number of children in the family increases and the parents begin to experience the additional responsibilities and tasks that accompany the presence of more children, fathers begin to neglect their parenting and mothers feel less satisfied with the support they receive, believing that it does not sufficiently help them cope with the stress of raising many children. However, to confirm this hypothesis, other couple-related variables must be included, such as satisfaction and marital intimacy. Additionally, a longitudinal study that assessed which variables explained change or stability of parenting alliance over time would be useful.

The authors of the PAI (Abidin & Brunner, 1995) also failed to observe an association between parenting alliance, child's age, parents' age, parental education level and family income. The observation that participants who were married or in a de facto union and were members of two-parent, stable families in which their spouse was their child's biological father had higher levels of parenting alliance than their counterparts is unsurprising. Among one-parent families, single mothers were those who reported lower parenting alliance scores. Abidin and Brunner (1995) found similar results in a community sample. These authors also found significant differences in parenting alliance scores among married, divorced and single women; married women showed the highest levels of parenting alliance. However, in their study, divorced women reported lower scores than single women. It is likely that parenting alliance varies according to the degree to which the couple relationship remains intact (Abidin & Brunner, 1995). This result highlights the interdependence of marital quality and parenting alliance: it appears to be more difficult to raise a child when the emotional bonds between the spouses are broken. Conflicts in the marital relationship can easily spill over into the coparenting system.

Several studies have noted a more intense association between marital quality and parent-child interaction among men than among women. When marriages deteriorate, men tend to

display more negative behaviors in their parent-child interactions or to emotionally withdraw from their children (Belsky et al., 1991; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000; Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001). The findings of these studies suggest that when the marital relationship ends, fathers tend to participate less in their children's upbringing. This may explain why divorced mothers feel that the fathers of their children do not perform their parenting roles in a satisfactory manner.

However, the conflicts that lead parents to separate can interfere with their ability to cooperate amicably in raising their children. When they separate, mothers and fathers may develop divergent educational styles, practices, beliefs and values, which undermine parenting alliance.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The parenting alliance levels of mothers of psychosocially at-risk families from the Algarve are lower than those reported by other authors who studied at-risk samples, including separated women living in unstable families with more children. Because parental conflict and lack of cooperation compromise a couple's ability to be effective parents (Bradford & Barber, 2007; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000), this factor should be taken into account when planning interventions with this population.

This study had several limitations. First, its geographical specificity did not allow us to generalize the results to other Portuguese at-risk populations. Additionally, the lack of a study validating the PAI for the Portuguese population made it difficult to compare participants' scores with those from community samples. Hence, the validation of the PAI for the Portuguese population is warranted. The study's reliance on self-descriptive measures is another limitation that should be compensated for in the future by using other methods and sources of information. In spite of these limitations, we believe that no previous published work has explored parenting alliance in Portuguese at-risk families. Therefore, this study is a contribution to the research in this area.

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