

FATHERLESSNESS AND PSYCHODRAMA FOR CHILDREN

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Abstract: *The absence of a father figure in a child's life can generate emotional difficulties, attachment problems, and a fragile self-image, influencing long-term psychosocial development. The absence of a father is often associated with feelings of abandonment, insecurity and difficulties in regulating emotions. In this context, psychodrama stands out as an effective therapeutic method, offering children a safe space to express their feelings and reinterpret difficult experiences. Through role-playing and dramatization, children can explore meaningful relationships, including the absent father figure, facilitating the process of understanding and emotional integration. Psychodrama also contributes to the development of empathy, increases self-esteem, and improves social skills.*

Key words: *development, father absence, psychodrama for children*

1. Psychodrama for Children

This therapy method for children was developed by Alfons Aichinger (Aichinger & Holl, 2017). In his book "Group therapy with children", he exposes the method and the four basic needs (self-efficacy, attachment and belonging, self-confidence, and joy), which helped him develop this play therapy method for children. Psychodrama is a group or individual psychotherapy method that allows participants to explore personal issues through role-playing and dramatic action (Aichinger & Holl, 2017). In the case of children, this method focuses on using play as a means of expression, given that they have not yet fully developed the verbal and cognitive skills necessary to articulate the complexity of their emotions and internal conflicts.

Alfons Aichinger (Aichinger & Holl, 2017) recognized the importance of play in children's development and used this aspect to structure psychodrama in a way that was accessible and relevant. His adaptations include simplified language, elements of play and symbolism, and a flexible therapeutic framework that addresses children's emotional needs. Spontaneity and creativity are fundamental elements of child psychotherapy, highlighted by Aichinger as vital in the psychodrama process. Children are encouraged to express themselves freely, without fear of judgment, and to explore

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various roles and scenarios that reflect their life experiences. This freedom of expression allows the child to connect with their emotions in a natural and unforced way.

Child psychodrama uses symbols and metaphors extensively. For example, a child might use a toy or role play to represent an important person in their life, or an object to symbolize an emotion or a difficult situation. These symbolic representations allow children to externalize their problems and explore them in a more manageable way (Aichinger & Holl, 2017). A key aspect of child psychodrama is role reversal, in which the child plays symbolic roles (such as princesses, cowboys, or superheroes) and projects significant people from their lives onto the therapist, thus conveying something meaningful, even if they are not yet able to verbally express it. They can utilize somatic and emotional regulation to mitigate the impact of external stressors and effectively satisfy their basic needs (Aichinger & Holl, 2017).

1.1. The 4 Basic Needs in Psychodrama for Children

Klaus Grawe (2004) identified four crucial basic needs of individuals, which Alfons Aichinger (2017) adapted to the context of children's play:

1. *The basic need for self-efficacy*: Grawe (2004) speaks of orientation and control; the child's need to make a difference, to influence and assert himself, to meet demands with his own competence, and, if necessary, to overcome obstacles. This need is seen as the most important in children's development (Mutafchieva et al., 2023).

2. *The basic need for attachment and belonging*: the need to connect with sensitive, trustworthy, available, safe and loving people. Depending on how much this need is satisfied, the child develops meaningful relationships with other children (Mutafchieva et al., 2023).

3. *The basic need for self-esteem*: comprises two distinct dimensions: in relation to the need for attachment, which involves the need to be lovable, valuable, important, appreciated and recognized, and the second aspect being in relation to the need to feel capable and competent (Mutafchieva et al., 2023).

4. *The basic need for joy*: describes the need for pleasure, for experiences, and states of joy. This "struggle" for pleasure/joy and the avoidance of pain/displeasure is the main reason for action (Mutafchieva et al., 2023).

These needs must be satisfied in a consistent and balanced way. They cannot be mutually compensated. In positive/good living conditions and if basic needs are satisfied, the child develops an internal model of functioning and stores mental representations about himself and the world. When a core need is chronically unmet or ignored, it becomes a dominant motivator. Consequently, an individual's behavioral focus shifts entirely toward satisfying this deficit, often at the expense of other fundamental needs. In this case, coping strategies are maladaptive, bringing high costs and negative effects, especially concerning attachment figures and peers (Mutafchieva et al., 2023).

2. Father's Absence and its Impact on Children

The absence or lack of fathers, sometimes called “father wound”, has been consistently associated with poorer emotional, behavioural, cognitive, and social development in children. Narrative studies show that absence, rejection, or lack of paternal warmth increases the risk of depression, anxiety, externalizing problems, and reduces overall psychological well-being from early childhood to young adulthood (Mbedzi, 2025).

The quality and pattern of father involvement are much more decisive than the level of father presence in the care of young children (Li et al., 2023). A harsh, minimally involved father ingrains a form of paternal wound that negatively impacts the child's social, emotional, and cognitive development. The paternal wound is a real and sustainable developmental risk (McLanahan et al., 2013). Within the framework of psychological well-being, this places the quality of the father-child relationship as a key factor affecting adaptive psychological function throughout the life cycle. Paternal absence directly affects nutrition, cognition, and socio-emotional skills, widening skill gaps that persist into later childhood (Rueda, 2021). Interventions involving fathers—such as web-based video feedback programs—improve eating habits, reduce depressive symptoms, and lead to measurable decreases in children's internalizing and externalizing problems (Cimino et al., 2024). Clinical guidelines emphasize “father hunger” as a specific source of developmental deficit and recommend therapeutic approaches that address grief, identity, and the reconstruction of a positive paternal narrative (Wineburgh, 2000). Together, these findings emphasize that father involvement is a critical, non-substitutable component of healthy child development and that specific, father-focused interventions can mitigate the negative impact of paternal loss.

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982) shows that early relationships play a significant role in a child's emotional, social, and psychological development. A child's bond with a caregiver is a “secure foundation” that helps the child explore the world, promoting resilience, self-esteem, and social competence (Pietromonaco et al., 2004; Holmes, 2014). If the “core” person is missing or the relationship is disrupted (the parent is out of the country for several months), children may experience emotional insecurity, anxiety, and difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships (Fredricks et al., 2016). Such disruptions can significantly affect their academic performance, emotional well-being, and social development (Renk & Phares, 2007).

3. Anxiety in Children

According to DSM 5 (APA, 2013), anxiety disorder in children is characterized by excessive fears, persistent worries, which affect daily functioning, avoidance of social situations. This disorder has several types, highlighting different fears. separation anxiety (excessive fear of being separated from attachment figures, accompanied by nightmares and refusal to go to school), generalized anxiety disorder (difficulty controlling worry about school, performance or safety, constantly seeking reassurance), social phobia or social anxiety (the intense fear of being humiliated or criticized in

public, causing the child to isolate himself and avoid interactions), selective mutism (the inability to speak in specific social situations occurs, although the child speaks in other contexts) (APA, 2013). In these situations, common symptoms are headaches, nausea, stomach pain, fatigue, palpitations, and tremors. Behavioral symptoms may appear, such as avoidance of new situations, social isolation, extreme shyness, nervous outbursts, perfectionism. The cognitive symptoms are characterized by difficulty in concentrating, catastrophic thoughts, and restlessness (DSM5, 2016). Regarding the conduct disorder, it is characterized by repetitive behaviors: antisocial, aggressive or defiant, which violate social norms and others' rights. These criteria include aggression towards people and animals (harassing, threatening, initiating physical fights, using weapons), destruction of property, lying or theft, serious violations of rules (school absenteeism, running away from home, breaking rules, before age 13). A milder form is oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), which is characterized by an angry/irritable mood, defiant/argumentative behavior, and vindictiveness as well as limited pro-social emotions: lack of remorse, of empathy, indifference to performance, and superficial affect. It can appear in childhood (before age 10) or adolescence.

4. Research Methodology

The general objective of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a psychological intervention program (based on psychodrama for children), carried out in a face-to-face format to fulfil the 4 basic needs. As a specific objective, we aimed at investigating the relationship between the absence of the father and the children's emotional state. We wanted to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between the absence of the father and the maladaptive behavior of children?
2. How does the relationship with the mother influence the child's behavior?
3. Can intervention through psychodrama for children contribute to the reduction of maladaptive behaviors?
4. Which role helps the child fulfill the 4 basic needs?

This research is based on 6 case studies of children of different ages, each facing the absence of their father. The structure of the case studies was identical: an initial clinical and anamnestic interview with the child's parent, then an initial session with the child in which, through play, the basic needs to be met were identified. Typically, in the first part of the session, the child is asked to think about what he is very good at, for example, running fast, and then he is asked to say why he came to therapy, where he will say the problem, for example, I don't listen to mommy, or I cry easily. After this step, the child is asked to choose an animal to represent himself, then an animal for his best part and then another animal for the "problem" he arrived with. Later, he chooses an animal for each family member. The therapist chooses a neutral animal, usually a fox, and a kind of interview is carried out, in which family relationships are observed. After this, the child is asked to tell a story using the rest of the props in order to easily identify the basic needs. The following sessions have the same structure, according to Psychodrama for children: in each session, the child (or group of children) is asked what they want to play and can

choose any role they want while the therapist receives a role chosen by the child and then together they build a story that they play in the session. For example, if the child wants to be a little bunny, and the therapist to be his caregiver, we can say that he needs attachment and is anxious. During play time, the therapist seeks to fulfill that need (as in the previous example, he tells him that he is a beautiful bunny, that he is safe, etc.). In each session, different or the same characters can be chosen, but the story is different. The child unconsciously builds his story because the therapist projects exactly what happens to him or around him.

During the sessions, depending on the roles chosen and implicitly on the way they play, these needs are slowly fulfilled. For example, we know that a change has occurred when the little bunny who is hidden in a big castle ends up choosing a superhero role, who defends the entire island from the villain. Then we realize that he has overcome fear and has the courage to "show himself to the world" and defend himself (bringing the need for self-confidence).

In the final evaluation, the initial objective of the intervention is considered achieved when the child changes the way the characters are, because it indicates a change in behavioral patterns. The evaluations made by the parents at the periodic meetings with them are also taken into account.

5. Case Studies

1. C. B., a 10-year-old boy, was brought to therapy because he was violent at school. Once, when he was teased harshly, he lost control and attacked a classmate with a knife. This was the most serious incident, but CB had had other violent outbursts. He struggled to concentrate during class and often received warnings from his teacher. He was diagnosed with ADHD a few years before. He lived in a small town with his parents and his 5-year-old younger brother, with whom he did not get along well. His maternal grandparents lived on the ground floor of the house. His mother worked in education, and his father worked abroad, with an unstable schedule and frequent absences for many months. When he was home, he would go out with friends, staying away from his family. His mother was concerned about his academic performance and helped him with his homework, though she sometimes lacked patience and argued with him. She found it difficult to manage him, especially regarding homework and his need for action. He mentioned seeing faces and ghosts in the corners of his room after watching a lot of horror movies with his father when he was younger.

Basic needs in therapy

During the psychodramatic game, CB experienced ambivalence between good and bad, between having limits and ignoring the rules. In the first session, the animals he chose and the way they were positioned showed that he felt excluded, different from those around him. CB chose domestic animals for all family members, but for himself and his rejected part, he chose wild animals. At the same time, he feels "rejected" by his father, who "was angry" with the bison, the animal chosen for the neglected part of himself (this may also be due to the fact that when the father comes back home from

abroad, he is very harsh with CB). His mother could not manage him, which was why "the cat (the mother) runs up the tree when he sees him".

In the second session, CB chose the monkey, saying that he liked people laughing at his jokes. It became evident through play that he was seeking appreciation and acceptance (highlighting the need for attachment). His aggressive reactions, namely his externalized anxiety, were always a reaction to teasing from his peers, which is in line with Rueda's findings (2021) that children with absent fathers have difficulties in socio-emotional development.

When playing, CB's most frequent basic need was control. His desire to move to increasingly aggressive weapons (from swords, to bombs, which killed the therapist, in some sessions CB becoming ruthless) demonstrated an unconscious need to face daily challenges. The fact that he "killed" the therapist shows that he was angry with authority, which was represented by his father. In the game, BC took the role of the villain, who caught the policeman and tortured him, at one point gouging out the policeman's eyes. This projects that CB did not feel seen by his parents or teachers, (the need for attachment, to be seen by his father). When the therapist asked him to stop, and he did not, it reflected reality: when he played with his father, and C asked him to stop, the father never stopped; his mother had to intervene to stop him. When the father played with him roughly and fought with him, even hitting C. The child often cried when he was hit too hard. The father's response was: "He needs to know how it feels when it hurts."

In the following sessions, the basic needs approached were attachment and control. CB was a sensitive child, but he masked this side of himself through his behavior to distract from important issues. He was "bad" because his father also had an abusive behavior towards him - he identified himself strongly with his father. On the one hand, he loved his father because he was his father, but on the other hand, he was angry with him for his absence and abusive behavior. CB felt helpless in front of his father and his behavior, which is why there was a moment of happiness when the villain was finally locked up, allowing CB, in the game, to feel that justice was finally being served.

Another important basic need is attachment, which the therapist felt needed to be strengthened in the relationship with CB's mother. It was decided to bring the mother into the sessions so that their relationship would not be based exclusively on school and homework, but also on joy and something "just for them". It was also a good opportunity for both of them to get to know each other better. After the session, CB expressed that he had no idea his mother could be so funny.

The change was observed through the choice of roles, which began to become positive, fulfilling the basic need for self-esteem. Later, CB chooses to be the savior of the forest and a hero. He perceived the lion king as evil, which reflected the way he perceived his father, the authoritarian figure. Another situation was when CB did justice: the banker stole the money from the city, and CB, in his role as savior, sent the banker to prison, somehow wanting to do justice himself, and implicitly to be able to change his relationship with his father.

2. A 9-year-old boy was brought to therapy by his mother because he had selective mutism and tantrums that were difficult for the mother to manage. He had a language delay, he said his first words at 3 years old, only within the family, and sometimes he did not speak even with the therapist. The father was not in the country when he was born. According to the mother, his father was an alcoholic and did not actively participate in raising the child, only helped financially. The mother divorced her child's father when S was 6 years old. Although 3 years have passed since the divorce, the mother had not accepted the idea of divorce, still hoping for his return, despite him having a new relationship. She was overprotective of S, trying to fill the void left by his father's absence. The mother claimed that when his father did not call S, he became more aggressive towards her, and she was unable to manage him. S had many moments when he refused to talk to his father.

Basic needs in therapy

In the first session, when he chose the animals for his family members, it was clear that he felt different, because he was the only animal that lived in water, and apart from the bear (the mother), all others were domestic animals. He wrote down that he felt lonely. (Having selective mutism, he only spoke at home, otherwise he would write on a sheet of paper to express himself). Clearly, the absence of his father and the quarrel between his parents were not doing him any good, and he chose to remain "silent". The basic needs were self-confidence, love (attachment) and joy. S clearly described the need for love, writing on the sheet "I wish I didn't feel lonely".

In the following sessions, S chose the role of Messi (playing football with the therapist), expressing the need for self-confidence and joy. The therapist tried to satisfy these basic needs by assuming the role of Ronaldo, who is less skilled. The fact that he received his diploma in the game, and that the interview was "televised" helped S gain self-confidence and satisfy his need for joy and self-efficacy.

In a later session, when S was the captain of a ship, the basic need was control, specific to an anxious child who wants everything under control. The fact that he was the best pilot of the ship helped him to boost his self-confidence. Saving animals made S feel useful and capable of doing things on his own. During the game, the therapist was put in the role of a "helpless" person, as a projection of his mother who felt helpless and who was unable to manage him. The fight with an alien (the therapist took this role) and the fact that he killed him, showed the child's anger towards his father and his absence. This session helped him find the courage to start talking.

The next session started with a surprise for the therapist, S wrote on the prepared sheet: "I have a surprise, I will...." and started talking. The scenario was similar to the previous sessions, but in this game, S was very happy with his success, even though he spoke slowly, explained many things, and talked about spaceships and planets. The need to save the animals from the aliens shows his need to "overcome" his anger and sadness. This time the therapist had to take on the role of the alien and fight the astronaut, which gave the child a sense of control and power. After the session in which he was already talking, he came to 2 more sessions and the mother did not schedule him anymore, but since then S has also spoken in class with his classmates.

3. M, aged 6, was brought to therapy because in December, when she was preparing for a dance performance, she started to have panic attacks, cry during training, be afraid of the dance coach, and had great resistance to changes in the coaches she was dancing with. Her mother took her to therapy, on the recommendation of the coach.

Basic needs in therapy

At the first session, M came quite bravely into the office and began to tell the therapist about her Christmas and what gifts she received. M would have wanted a kitten, but "because I didn't do well at the dances, I didn't get one". She spoke about what her father did when she was little, as if her father were alive, even if he dies when she was 2. The need for security, self-confidence and joy were identified.

The need for self-confidence and self-efficacy was derived from the fact that M chose the role of a beautiful, smart clown who performed magic and taught his disciples how to do the same. The disciple (the therapist) said that she was afraid because the animals around them were flying and getting more and more scared. M projected all her anxieties onto the therapist, putting her in situations where she felt helpless, was afraid and alternated between reality and imagination. All animals and things fly, the disciple asked the clown if what she saw was real, things that were flying, and the clown said that "if you see them, it means they are real".

In the 3rd session, M symbolically buried her father, telling the therapist that he died, was buried, and then had the therapist make her caterpillar sandwiches. M said that "today I died, only you see me, no one else can see me, because I am invisible". This showed her need to get closer to her father, but also to put an end to her fears related to his death. The therapist told the clown: "you died and you are invisible, but you are among people". M., in her role, answered, "yes, I am invisible, but you can see me. And my role is to take care of all the animals". This was the projection of the stories told her at home, that her father was dead, but he was among them, even if she could not see him. Often, ambivalence between death, reality and imagination appeared. After a few sessions, when the Clown returned, M changed the game, putting the therapist in roles where she was tough or kind to M. M needed control, constantly changing roles slightly, and after a few sessions she went back to "visible and invisible." The therapist was made to faint at one point because she was so afraid of everything that was happening.

There were sessions in which M's need was to be happy so she chose roles in which she could dress up and have fun. She wanted to fight against the therapist (need for power), in some sessions, through play, she took the therapist on a trip, without knowing where they were going, wanting to control everything. The need for self-confidence was seen in the roles she assigned herself, in one session she became a ballerina who had self-confidence, and she put the therapist in the role of a ballerina without self-confidence and who was scared of everything new. After this session, M was taken by her mother to Constanta on a ship, where there were many men, and M was no longer scared. She went back to visit the dance club, where she was afraid of the coach, and M high-fived the coach, talked to him, and then went to the dance hall to watch her former teammates dance.

4. C was a 6-year-old girl, her mother had been a housewife since her birth, her father was a ship captain, he traveled a lot and was away 6-7 months a year. When C was 3 months old, her father went on a cruise for a year. Her mother stayed with her and her older brother, who was 14 years older than C. When C was little, she called him "daddy". She had a hard time accepting her father, although they have a very good relationship now. C. was brought to group therapy because at kindergarten she could not accept that she was not the best or that she did not always manage to be good. She had outings in which she would get angry, refuse to talk to the teacher and put on her clothes to leave. She wanted to be the best, the smartest, even if she happened to make mistakes. From the anamnestic interview with the mother, it emerged that at home she always wanted to make flashcards by herself, she learned to handwrite the letters by herself and could already read. She argued a lot with her mother, had an oppositional behavior, and was jealous of her mother for receiving flowers from her husband who is away.

Basic needs in therapy

The need for safety, the need for self-sufficiency and self-confidence and joy were identified. In the first session, C chose to be a good pink frog (the need for appreciation and self-confidence). Self-sufficiency appeared in her role as a savior, who received power and defeated the evil researcher (the role of the therapist).

The need for self-confidence emerged when C took on the role of a brave, strong bunny living in a castle with 100 rooms (the need for security). C had moments in the play when she became obsessive, folded "clothes" for several good minutes, projected her mother's behavior, and raised her voice at a colleague for not folding clothes properly. In many sessions, she folded clothes, cleaned from the role of a princess, as "she cleans the best". She wanted roles in which she had a "guy" showing the need for affection, and the longing for her father, who had been away for a long time. When he would come home, C was very sensitive in sessions, crying over little things. Sometimes, if there was a fight in the group, or a quarrel, C hid, saying that she was afraid.

Her behavior in kindergarten changed, no longer having tantrums, but C continued to choose roles showing the need for affection and safety. She often chose roles of small animals that require special care. The obsessional component was still present. She did not access her inner sadness. In a session, she took on the role of an animal caretaker, and when her favorite cat died, she did not want to cry for it in the game. The therapist in the role of the dog had to realize that the caretaker was sad because she left without saying anything as that happened in reality, when her father left, she forced herself not to cry and not access her sadness, retreating to her room and keeping her silence.

5. E was a 6-year-old girl, brought to the group because she was aggressive and very energetic in kindergarten. Her parents divorced when she was 3 years old. E had tantrums and her parents were unable to manage these outbursts. When she was 5 years old, E was visiting her father, who did not know how to manage her tantrum so he pretended to die by taking a pill. She had many months in which she said that she had killed her father.

Basic needs

E had been in group therapy for 4 months, and the first role chosen was a small but very brave puppy (lack of self-confidence, need for affection). In every session she fought, she wanted to kill the bad guy, which shows anger towards her father. The role of the little dog shows both loyalty, which she certainly felt towards her mother, and the need to be loved, as well as her anxiety. The need for control was present as she wanted to control the whole game, everything to be done as she wanted. She felt humiliated in her relationship with her father, making the therapist eat and drink urine and faeces, in the game. In other sessions, the need for self-efficacy appeared through roles of savior, in which she was the strongest and could save the world, or a dog, who was fast like Sonic. In one session, the need for control and self-confidence emerged through the role of a very fast, invincible bunny (by choosing this role, no one could hurt her, which reflected her desire). She controlled the whole session, and then she wanted the therapists to die and return in the role of a zombie, ghost, skeleton. Her anger towards her father was very deep, and she wished she could overcome her fear of him.

Major changes are not yet noticeable, because he has been in therapy for a short time, but in the last session, she was not so aggressive, choosing to hide, and be safe, then to make a princess birthday cake (need for safety and need for self-efficacy). E's speech therapist said that she was more attentive and a little calmer in the sessions.

6. E is a 7-year-old boy, who was brought to therapy because he was aggressive and agitated. He had a language delay and a borderline intellect. He has an older sister, in 8th grade. His father was often abroad for work. He lived mainly with his mother, being very attached to her, and was afraid of abandonment. E had some problems at birth, which required medication. He was bullied in class.

Basic needs: He was in the therapy group for 4 months, attended 7 sessions in total. In the first session, he chose the role of a horse, but he changed it after a colleague chose the role of a shark. The need for self-confidence was evident in his choice of invincible animals, his desire to control everything, which is why he often carried a toy that could stop time. He took on the roles of a savior and a helper, the need for self-sufficiency being observed here. In several, he killed the therapist (showing anger towards the authority, in this case the father, because he was away). The need for joy appeared in the role of a visible and invisible horse, which took wives, but also ran and did everything that others did. The need for control also appeared when he wanted to throw bombs at the villain (therapist) to save the others. The need for love appeared in the roles of a bunny who was cared for, and who became strong. He wanted to belong to the group, he was happy when he came to the sessions, he left happily and often exclaimed, 'here are my friends'. Every time he hugged the therapist saying that he missed her, highlighting the need for affection and acceptance. At school, he was bullied for not speaking correctly, or for not being as intelligent as other children.

4. Discussion

Each case is unique, but still, something is similar. The absence of a father is a factor that can lead to attachment disorders and poor social relationships (Jumiati, 2025), poor school performance and academic disengagement (Jumiati, 2025), difficulties in integrating into the classroom and negative labeling ("bad, aggressive child"), boys without a father at 5 years old being 3.2 times more likely to develop behavioral problems in adolescence (violence, defiance, school dropout) and girls frequently manifesting relational aggression (Coley, Morris 2002). Every child has problems at kindergarten or school, related to peers. Everyone is teased, or they tease, and a discrepancy is observed in their socialization. Each child has "killed" the anger felt towards their father in some way: C., from the villain role, when she catches the policeman and tortures him, at some point she gouges out the policeman's eyes, or when E. from many sessions in a row from her roles kills the villain, from the puppy role, she forces the therapist to drink and eat feces. M. symbolically reburies her father, putting the therapist underground. In these sessions, children access their emotions and needs in their own unique way. Even if they are unable to verbalize their emotions, play helps them overcome their anxiety, which is present in each of them. According to Rembuluwani Paul Mbedzi, (2025) children without fathers have externalizing problems, which is observed in each of the cases presented. M. cries and has panic attacks when something new happens, the other children use aggression as a way of defense, and S. chooses "calmness" in his interactions with the world outside the home.

The need for attachment is present in every child because of the father's absence. Secure attachment bonds, formed in early childhood, are essential for emotional control and self-esteem. Without a father, children can develop insecure attachment styles, which leads to emotional instability and difficulties in establishing trusting relationships (Teki, 2012). The last time E's father left, E. became aggressive with her mother, projecting her anger onto her. During the session, she chose the role of a dog that annoyed a horse, playing with its tail. She projects her pain onto her colleague, so that it would be a little easier for her to experience this separation again. The same aspect is visible in C., when her father comes, she can hardly wait, and during the session, she becomes very agitated, cries hitting the floor. When C's father leaves, she becomes agitated, aggressive, and out of character, fights with the therapist. These aspects are important for adults to understand as well, so they can more easily manage children's tantrums.

The need for joy is felt by every child, because the father's absence is a factor that leads to sadness, poor emotional regulation and internalizing disorders (Amato, 2002). "Fun" play is important for everyone. C., in the session with his mother, when she was playing, started laughing out loud. There was a session before Christmas, in which C was the good elf, and at the end the therapist offered gifts to the children from her sleigh together with the elf, C started screaming with joy. E enjoys the roles of bunny or puppy, when she has the opportunity to be in her element, without any pressure, and when she is able to defeat the villain, or when she can dance.

The fear of abandonment appears in E., when she tells her mother "where have you been? I missed you", which is reflected in the role of a little puppy, who needs care. In C., the fear of abandonment is reflected in her behavior towards her mother, who does not let her go to her work after dinner, and when her mother leaves and then returns, she tells her that she missed her, even if she was gone for an hour. That is why she takes on the roles of a little pink frog, or a kitten, so that she can fulfill her need for affection and at the same time experience her emotions of fear and sadness.

At the end of each session, children are asked what they liked the most, this helping them learn to reflect on their experiences. During the sessions, each child has the chance to access their inner world and in a symbolic way (play) they manage to overcome their pain and fears. They get in touch with themselves and develop inner resources that help them develop more harmoniously.

5. Conclusions

The general objective of this research was to evaluate the effectiveness of a face-to-face psychological intervention program based on child psychodrama in addressing the four fundamental psychological needs. Empirical observations confirm the realization of this objective, as evidenced by significant behavioral modifications extending beyond the therapeutic sessions into the children's daily environments. For instance, S. initiated verbal communication, C. exhibited a reduction in school-based aggression, and E. demonstrated increased attention and compliance during speech therapy sessions. Furthermore, C. ceased exhibiting tantrums at kindergarten and expanded her dietary variety, while M. overcame her performance-related fear by physically interacting (high-fiving) with her instructor. Additionally, E. developed the capacity to assertively communicate peer-inflicted distress. Regarding the specific objective—investigating the correlation between paternal absence and children's emotional well-being—the data revealed a direct link between behavioral fluctuations and the departure or return of fathers. For M., paternal bereavement profoundly impacted her emotional baseline, projecting this loss onto external fears and her relationship with her teacher.

In addressing the first research question, the findings indicate that paternal absence directly correlates with the emergence of aggressive or anxious maladaptive behaviors, which often overwhelm maternal coping strategies. Concerning the second research question, the analysis demonstrated that mothers frequently struggle with the emotional regulation of their children's distress, leading to heightened anxiety during behavioral tantrums. Consequently, a process of emotional contagion occurs: when children perceive maternal sadness or anxiety, they internalize these emotional states or manifest feelings of guilt.

Regarding the third research question, the psychodrama intervention effectively contributed to mitigating maladaptive behaviors, yielding progressive, systemic improvements in the participants' conduct. Finally, in response to the fourth research question exploring the role-play dynamics, the symbolic roles assumed by the children served as a vital vehicle for fulfilling their four basic needs via projective integration. To address self-efficacy, C. and E. engaged in prosocial behaviors, such as helping others or

symbolically baking for peers. Attachment needs were met as E. and C. adopted vulnerable roles (e.g., puppies or rabbits). Self-esteem was reinforced when S. assumed the persona of Lionel Messi, and E. played a rabbit possessing the speed of Sonic. Lastly, the basic need for pleasure and joy was externalized when M. embodied a good dancer characterized by laughter, and C. orchestrated an elaborate social celebration for the symbolic animals.

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