

ATYPICAL FATHERHOOD AND BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS: THE POWER OF THE FATHER AS AN AGENT OF TRANSFORMATION IN ASD

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Abstract: This essay explores fatherhood in the context of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), addressing the painful duality between the statistics of paternal abandonment and the extraordinary power of the father who remains and actively engages. It argues that paternal presence, when informed by the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and exercised in the natural environment of the home, transcends mere support to become one of the most effective forms of therapeutic intervention. Grounded in the literature and intertwined with the author's personal account—a father who discovered his own ASD diagnosis while seeking help for his children—the text argues that the father's conscious involvement is a critical variable that catalyzes development, strengthens the family bond, and redefines the meaning of fatherhood itself.

Keywords: Atypical Fatherhood, Behavior Analysis, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Paternal Involvement, Neurodiversity.

Introduction: The Crossroads of Diagnosis

The day of a child's diagnosis is a crossroads. For a parent, the news that their child is on Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can feel like the crumbling of a world of expectations. At that very moment, a path forks. On the one hand, there is the road of denial and escape. On the other, there is a steeper and more uncertain path, but one that leads to a destination of deep significance: that of acceptance, struggle and surrender.

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As the father of a 10-year-old boy with ASD level 3 support and a 13-year-old girl with level 1, and also as a behavior analyst, I live daily on this second road. This essay was born out of my full conviction of the advancement and evolution of my children due to my presence and encouragement. It is a testimony that seeks to confront the shadow of abandonment with the light of present fatherhood, arguing that this presence, when combined with the tools of Behavior Analysis, becomes the driving force for the development of a child with ASD.

The Shadow of Abandonment: The Statistic and the Wound

It is impossible to ignore the reality reflected in alarming data. Although there is a lack of official censuses that specifically cross paternal abandonment with the diagnosis of ASD, the most referenced statistic in this debate comes from the Baresi Institute and is widely reported by the press. According to these data, about 78% of parents separate from their mother before their child with a rare disease or disability turns 5 years old (ESTADÃO, 2021).

This escape can be understood as a difficulty in dealing with the mourning for the “idealized child”, a wound in paternal narcissism that many cannot bear (Costa, 2008). This psychological shock is aggravated by what Brazilian researchers such as Smeha and Cezar (2011) identify as a crisis of traditional male identity, in which the “failure” to generate a “perfect” descendant can lead to intense feelings of inadequacy. Dropout, therefore, is not just a statistic; It is a wound that marks the child and overwhelms the mother, who is forced to take on all the roles in an already exhausting journey.

The Counterpoint: The Power of the Father Who Remains and Discovers Himself

In total opposition to the figure of the absent father, the power of the father who remains emerges. This father not only remains physically; it rebuilds itself. He understands that his role is not to mourn the son who did not come, but to learn to connect with the son who is there, in his arms. Its



active presence becomes one of the richest environments for development.

In my case, this journey was even deeper. By immersing myself in studies to help my children, by seeking to understand their needs and ways of seeing the world, I came across a mirror. It was from them, in the incessant search for answers and help, that my own diagnosis of ASD came. This discovery was not an additional burden; It was a key. Suddenly, many of my own difficulties and quirks made sense. I understood that the connection with my children was not only empathetic, but neurobiologically shared. It transformed my parenting and my practice. The paternal mission was redefined:

“The goal was never the ‘cure’ or the search for ‘normal’ children. My goal, as a parent and as a behavior analyst, is to fight for them to be functional, to have the autonomy to make their own choices and to achieve a full quality of life, as close as possible to typicality. Connection and love are the way, but their autonomy is the destination.”

Analysis of Behavior at Home: The Family as a Therapeutic Environment

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is recognized for its effectiveness, but its true strength is manifested when its principles go beyond the walls of the clinic and permeate the family routine. The home is the main setting of the child’s life, and it is there that the skills need to make sense. This is where the father figure becomes absolutely central.

When a parent understands the basic principles of behavior, he stops seeing challenges as “tricks” and starts to see them as communication. He learns that the environment can be structured to favor learning. This is the core of naturalistic approaches such as Teaching in a Natural Environment (NET). As Hart and Risley (1975) describe in their pioneering work, language and other skills are learned most effectively when taught in response to the child’s own initiatives and motivations. The father’s role in the home is the purest application of this principle.

The philosophy is also central to models such as Pivot Response Training (PRT), developed



by Koegel and Koegel (2006), which focuses on teaching “pivotal” skills – such as motivation and the ability to respond to multiple cues – within natural play interactions. The father who plays on the floor with his child, following his lead, is applying the best practice of behavioral science.

“Behavior Analysis gave me the ‘how,’ but my kids teach me the ‘why.’ Each game on the floor is an opportunity to teach commands. Each tight hug after a difficult task is a differential reinforcer. Science has given me the tools, but love, and now self-understanding, show me which one to use and how to use it with kindness.”

The foundation of ABA in the family environment, promoted by both parents, ensures the generalization and maintenance of skills, making the learning process an act of love and connection.

Conclusion: An Uncertain Road, but Full of Love and Self-Knowledge

Atypical fatherhood puts us in front of a fundamental choice. That of being defined by the diagnosis or that of defining it from our actions. The decision to stay, to get involved and to learn is an act of courage that transforms not only the child, but the father himself. In my case, this transformation was literal: by seeking to be the best father to my children, I became more aware of myself.

The union of paternal dedication with the principles of Behavior Analysis creates a virtuous cycle: the father, by applying effective strategies, sees the child’s progress; This progress reinforces the father’s behavior, who becomes more confident and engaged, generating even more progress in the child. It is proof that knowledge, when put at the service of love, is the most powerful tool that exists.

To all parents who find themselves at this crossroads, my report is an invitation not to give up. It is a call to trace with your children an uncertain road, but full of love. Because in the end, their advancement and evolution will be the most eloquent testimony to the potency that exists in a parent who decides, against all odds, to simply stay, fight, and in the process, find himself.



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