

# Editorial

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## Combating violence against children and adolescents: a challenge for Brazilian society

The idea of childhood has varied over the centuries and between cultures. According to Narodowski, childhood is a historical phenomenon and not merely a natural one, and in the West its primary characteristics can be classified as *heteronomy, dependence and obedience to an adult in exchange for protection*<sup>1</sup>. This perspective is in line with Philippe Ariès's proposition, which suggests that *we must accept that childhood, as it is understood today, did not exist before the sixteenth century*<sup>2</sup>.

Ariès's statement allows us to understand that throughout history, and even in prehistory, the idea of a child or the concept of childhood did not exist. Even if there is no evidence, since there are no pictorial records or artefacts that prove this, this situation is attributed to high infant mortality. Extremely harsh living conditions for all – adults and children – are also a likely cause of life expectancy to have been only 20 or 30 years, according to studies of hunter-gatherer human fossils that existed thousands of years ago<sup>3</sup>.

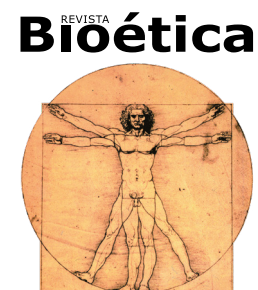
In Imperial Rome birth was not a biological fact and *newborns only came into the world, or rather, they were only received into society by virtue of a decision by the head of the family; contraception, abortion, the abandonment of free-born children, and the infanticide of children of slaves were therefore customary and perfectly legal practices*<sup>4</sup>. In this society the father exercised the right to give a child his or her social life by raising it from the ground, where he or she was placed by the midwife, to state that the father grants him/her the right to life. Unrecognized babies were abandoned on the street or thrown in the dumps where very few survived<sup>4</sup>.

In the Middle Ages, the situation of the unborn changed somewhat; their right to survive at birth was no longer a paternal prerogative, but stemmed directly from their mothers' circumstances. *Babies younger than 2 years in particular suffered from frightening disregard, with parents considering it unwise to invest much time or effort in a 'poor sighing animal' who was so likely to die at a young age*<sup>5</sup>.

As Ariès records, in the Middle Ages, before the children's schooling, children shared the same places and situations of social interaction with adults, both in the domestic sphere, at work and at festivities. *In medieval society there was no territorial and activity division depending on the age of individuals, there was no sense of childhood or an elaborate representation of this phase of life*<sup>4</sup>.

But even though children shared the daily life of their elders, especially after being considered fit for work (usually around seven years of age) or marriage (between nine or ten years of age), the funerary sculptures of the period recall the precariousness of children's lives. Babies, placed in narrow cribs, under poor hygienic conditions and precariously breastfeeding, died in large numbers:

*In common or peasant environments, infant mortality was considerable at the time of the plagues (1348-1430). From that moment, and even more from the fifteenth century onwards, infanticide (by suffocation) was no longer an exceptional*



*phenomenon, and abandonment had become sufficiently numerous (...) Babies, especially females, were very fragile and at times unwanted, so that attachment to them had to withstand the severe duress of poverty*<sup>6</sup>.

Sexual violence also loomed over childhood, especially over girls who were victims of rape, although sodomy crimes against boys also appeared in court records.<sup>7</sup> Associated with seduction, loss of virginity and harm to the honour of the father or husband, in a period in which crime against property was considered more distressing than crimes against the person, the laws and punishment varied according to the social class of the accusers and of the victim, due to the fact that there was a third party register of reaction to the act (cries and tears) and of other physical marks, such as bruises and cuts. Rape was intimately associated with sin and tainted the victim as well: *The victim of sexual violence belongs, albeit confusingly, to the same record of rejection*<sup>8</sup>.

In the period between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the family ties between the parents and the newborn remained tenuous. It was customary for the bourgeoisie to make use of the service of wet nurses, and the baby's stay with the family was rare. It is estimated that in Tuscany only 23% of the wet nurses lived in the homes of their employers<sup>6</sup>. Most of the time the newborns were taken to the wet nurses' homes, competing with the wet nurses' children themselves and with other children the wet nurses received for breastfeeding. When the newborns did not die, they were returned to the families at around the age of two, but there were cases of children who stayed with the wet nurses until they were much older<sup>6</sup>, demonstrating their secondary role in the family structure.

Forna emphasizes that *until the eighteenth century, childhood was brief and harsh. The mother-child relationship so exalted in modern times barely existed*<sup>9</sup>. Among the peasantry, the needs of the child were superseded by all other activities related to the house, the work in the field and the well-being of the other members of the family. Thus, housework, cooking, planting, caring for animals and the sick had priority over parental care:

*The child was born and, if he or she survived (which was a big "if"), received only the sustenance that was deemed necessary and very little attention. At a certain age, the child entered into adult life, which for the most part meant being put to work (...) Childhood was not, as we believe today, a distinct state of growth, of vulnerability and innocence, which requires special attention. Children were not just "small people", but much worse. It was believed that man was born in sin and it was the duty of parents to instil their moral sense (usually by the force of beatings)*<sup>9</sup>.

But the difficulties children went through were not restricted to the old world. Accounts of the Guayaki people, hunter-gatherers previously known also as Aché, who inhabited the jungles of Paraguay, say that when an important member of the group died, they used to sacrifice a female child and bury her with the dead, probably believing that action would make life after death easier. Another of the many reports capable of shocking contemporary sensibility is that babies born with no hair were considered undeveloped and killed immediately<sup>10</sup>.

In Brazil, the perception and treatment of children during the colonial period was not very different, since the slave society greatly reinforced violence in relationships. Del Priore reports that in the nineteenth century, 4% of slaves brought to trade in the market of Cais do Valongo, in the then capital of the country, Rio de Janeiro, were children, of whom only one-third survived to 10 years of age<sup>11</sup>. Many of them were forced to work from the age of four. In fact, *child labour continued to be seen by some segments as "the best school"*<sup>11</sup> until the end of the nineteenth century.

Nowadays, our perspective on childhood has altered radically. In the twentieth century this notion was consolidated universally, supported even in international documents such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which in its article 25, paragraph 2, states: *Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection*<sup>12</sup>. Throughout the 1960s and subsequent decades, different international documents also noted the need to meet the educational, health, physical, intellectual and emotional needs of children and young people<sup>13-16</sup>.

By ratifying these documents, and even enacting the Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente (ECA) [Child and Adolescent Statute]<sup>17</sup>, Brazil expresses its intention to protect children, protecting the most vulnerable from maltreatment and violence that had hitherto been trivialized and gone unpunished. The ECA amendment, informally called the “Slap Law”, further emphasized the banishment of physical punishment or cruel or degrading treatment to raise children<sup>18</sup>. But what is seen on the streets and recorded by the media is that violence against children persists in the country and worldwide.

If the three powers of the Republic, families and society were to comply with articles 3, 4 and 7 of the ECA, we would not have generations of children abandoned on the streets of our cities. In a 1953 publication, José Carlos Oliveira, a *Jornal do Brasil* columnist, already described the drama of abandoning these beings in the streets of Rio, he appealed to politicians to *do whatever wrongs they want, steal, but do not stop looking after and taking care of children*, thus predicting the impending violence<sup>19</sup>.

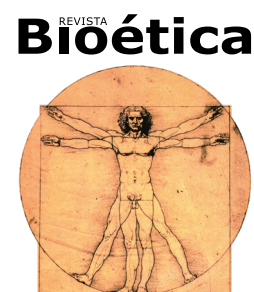
Material published by the Brazilian government reported in May 2017 that the “Dial 100” call centre *received, in 2015 and 2016, 37 thousand reports of crime involving people up to 18 years of age. Most of the victims were girls. (...) Most of the reports related to crimes of sexual abuse (72%) and sexual exploitation (20%)*<sup>20</sup>. With respect to male adolescent children (10 to 19 years old), Brazil is also among the five worst among the nations that are experiencing the formal situation of armed conflicts<sup>21</sup>.

The situation is not restricted only to Brazil. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (Unicef), 24,500 homicides of children and adolescents - unrelated to armed conflicts - occurred in Latin America and the Caribbean, which have the highest rates of homicide in a state of peace<sup>19 21</sup>. The homicide rate per 100,000 people in this age group is also high in Venezuela (97), Colombia (71), El Salvador (66) and Honduras (65)<sup>22</sup>.

If the region stands out in child maltreatment, the rest of the world is not far behind, as Unicef studies show that *every 7 minutes a child or teenager, between 10 and 19 years old, dies somewhere in the world, a victim of homicide, or of some form of armed conflict or collective violence*<sup>21</sup>. As Unicef acknowledges<sup>21</sup>, homicide is often the last stage of a series of adverse circumstances to which children are subjected.

Corporal punishment in early childhood (which sometimes kills or leaves permanent aftereffects), violence in schools (widespread among students who usually harass one another and even their teachers), sexual violence (especially in the domestic sphere among all social classes) and armed conflicts (which, in the case of Brazil, refer mainly to groups engaged in the trafficking of drugs, arms and women) also affect the lives of children, damaging their physical and mental health.

A systematic review published in 2016 shows that in Brazil negligence was the most frequent form of violence, accounting for about two-thirds of all records, and was predominant in children younger than one year of age, with physical violence prevalent amongst older children. In two-thirds of the incidents, the likely perpetrator



of violence was a relative of the child. Women were the most frequent aggressor of children under the age of one, and men of children between 6 and 9 years of age<sup>23</sup>.

Even cellular technology, with the use of the internet and its apps, social media and other technological advances, which play a fundamental role in our lives and in the cognitive and intellectual development of children and adolescents, has often been used to harm, leading to bullying and sexual harassment, for example. In addition to addiction, the use of such equipment can cause physical and mental problems caused by overuse.

Several entities are struggling to reverse this situation, such as the Guardianship Council, the Civil Districts of Infancy and Adolescence, the Brazilian Society of Paediatrics and its 27 affiliates, the Brazilian Federal Council of Medicine, the Public Prosecutor's Office and its Missing Persons Identification and Placement Program, the Institute for Migration and Human Rights, the UN Refugee Agency and others, try to protect them. Even so, data indicates that in Brazil children and adolescents correspond to 18% of refugees, which probably increases even more the violence to which this age group is exposed<sup>24,25</sup>. Data from the Missing Persons Identification and Placement Program, drawn up by the São Paulo Public Prosecutor's Office, show that in five years 8,802 children and 45,866 adolescents in São Paulo disappeared. 15% of them were never found<sup>26</sup>.

These troubling numbers indicate that the fight against violence in our society is a task that we still need to face. Violence against children is the first manifestation of a widespread phenomenon, which affects teenagers, young people, the elderly, the disabled, women, indigenous people, the black population, migrants, and people who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transvestites and transgender (LGBT), especially if they also belong to the poorest social segments. This intergenerational label that transports violence to the future must be eradicated as soon as possible so that we can aim for a truly autonomous and emancipated society. For this, it is never too much to remember, it is imperative to always promote wide, general and unrestricted education for all Brazilian citizens: an education based on ethics and citizenship. Only then can justice be achieved.

**The editors**

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