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Maternal Meanings of Childhood Tantrums in Preschool Children: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study

Significados maternos sobre las rabietas infantiles en niños preescolares: un estudio fenomenológico interpretativo

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Abstract

This study aims to understand how mothers interpret their preschool-aged children's tantrums and what meaning they attribute to them in the context of emotional regulation and family life. A qualitative study with an interpretive phenomenological approach was conducted at the Ovidio de Croli Preschool, located in Jauja, Peru. Ten mothers of preschoolers, selected through purposive sampling, participated in the study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using the interpretive phenomenological method. The mothers described tantrums as expressions of frustration, a need for attention, or behaviors typical of child development. These episodes generated feelings of concern, frustration, and helplessness. To cope with them, they primarily resorted to dialogue, emotional support, and distraction; however, in more tense situations, they also exhibited punitive responses. Tantrums are

part of a complex experience where the child's emotional development and family dynamics converge. Understanding how mothers perceive them can guide parental support strategies that promote better emotional regulation and healthier family relationships.

Keywords: Child Behavior, child rearing, emotion regulation.

Resumen

El presente estudio busca comprender cómo las madres interpretan las rabietas de sus hijos en edad preescolar y qué significado les atribuyen en el contexto de la regulación emocional y la vida familiar. Se realizó un estudio cualitativo con enfoque fenomenológico interpretativo en la Institución Educativa Inicial Ovidio de Croli, ubicada en Jauja, Perú. Participaron diez madres de niños preescolares seleccionadas de forma intencional. La información se recopiló mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas y se analizó a través del método fenomenológico interpretativo. Las madres describieron las rabietas como expresiones de frustración, necesidad de atención o comportamientos propios del desarrollo infantil. Estos episodios generaron sentimientos de preocupación, frustración e impotencia. Para afrontarlos, recurrieron principalmente al diálogo, la contención emocional y la distracción; sin embargo, en situaciones de mayor tensión también manifestaron respuestas punitivas. Las rabietas forman parte de una experiencia compleja donde confluyen el desarrollo emocional del niño y las dinámicas familiares. Conocer cómo las madres las comprenden puede orientar acciones de acompañamiento parental que favorezcan una mejor regulación emocional y relaciones familiares más saludables.

Palabras clave: Conducta infantil, crianza del niño, regulación emocional.

Introduction

Socioemotional development during early childhood constitutes a cornerstone of later mental health and social adaptation (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Between ages three and five, behaviors such as tantrums are part of normal developmental processes; nevertheless, their intensification or poor management may signal difficulties in child emotion regulation and family dynamics (Papalia & Martorell, 2017; Tremblay et al., 2004). These behaviors manifest through intense crying, screaming, physical outbursts, and opposition to authority figures, reflecting the child's difficulty managing frustration and expressing emotions appropriately (Potegal & Davidson, 2003).

In rural Andean Peruvian contexts such as the Curimarca community in Jauja, these behaviors take on particular nuances shaped by sociocultural and structural factors. Mothers assume nearly exclusive responsibility for child care and upbringing, while fathers devote themselves to agricultural work, limiting their active involvement. This traditional division of labor places a heavy burden on mothers, who manage disruptive behaviors without adequate tools, thereby affecting the quality of parenting practices (Bornstein, 2012).

This situation is compounded by the scarcity of child mental health infrastructure in rural areas. The local health center lacks psychological services to provide timely guidance. Moreover, no specific state programs address tantrum management; initiatives such as Cuna Más or Qali Warma, although valuable in nutrition and general development, do not cover emotional education or parental guidance in this area, reflecting structural inequities in access to mental health care (OMS, 2013).

The lack of community coordination exacerbates the problem: the municipality does not actively promote child well-being, no organized family support spaces exist, and irregular school attendance limits the protective role of the educational setting. This environment, with few support resources, restricts opportunities for early intervention and strengthening of parental competencies, key elements in preventing behavioral problems (Sanders, 2012). Accordingly, the present study aimed to analyze the experiences and

meanings that mothers from Curimarca attribute to their 3- to 5-year-old children's tantrums, contributing evidence for the design of context-sensitive interventions in rural settings.

Evidence indicates that emotional self-regulation in childhood is fundamental to psychological well-being and future social adjustment (Eisenberg et al., 2019). From this perspective, tantrums should not be viewed solely as acts of disobedience but as manifestations of self-control capacities still under development (Guerrero, 2018). Early experiences and family interactions thus play a pivotal role in children's socioemotional development (Morris et al., 2020; Zinsser et al., 2019).

Similarly, systems theory holds that child behavior must be understood within family dynamics (Minuchin, 1974; Bowen, 1978). Tantrums reflect both the child's emotional processes and parenting styles and family communication patterns. In this context, caregiver responses can either foster or hinder the learning of emotional regulation (Breaux et al., 2024; Gottman et al., 2019). Understanding how mothers interpret these experiences is therefore essential for comprehending parenting practices and their influence on child development.

Methodology

This research was conducted at the Ovidio de Croly preschool in Jauja Province, Junín Region, Peru. The study was basic in nature and framed within a qualitative approach, as it sought to understand and interpret the meanings that mothers attribute to their preschoolers' tantrums based on their parenting experiences. Grounded theory methods were employed, enabling the identification of categories, properties, and relationships among data, thereby facilitating the generation of a theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under study.

The population consisted of mothers of children aged 3 to 5 enrolled at the Ovidio de Croly preschool. The sample comprised ten mothers selected through intentional non-probabilistic sampling, based on their direct experience with the phenomenon. Data collection was carried out using in-depth interviews, with a semi-structured interview guide validated by expert judgment as the instrument. Interviews were conducted after participants signed informed consent forms, were audio-recorded with authorization, and transcribed verbatim to ensure fidelity and rigor of the information obtained.

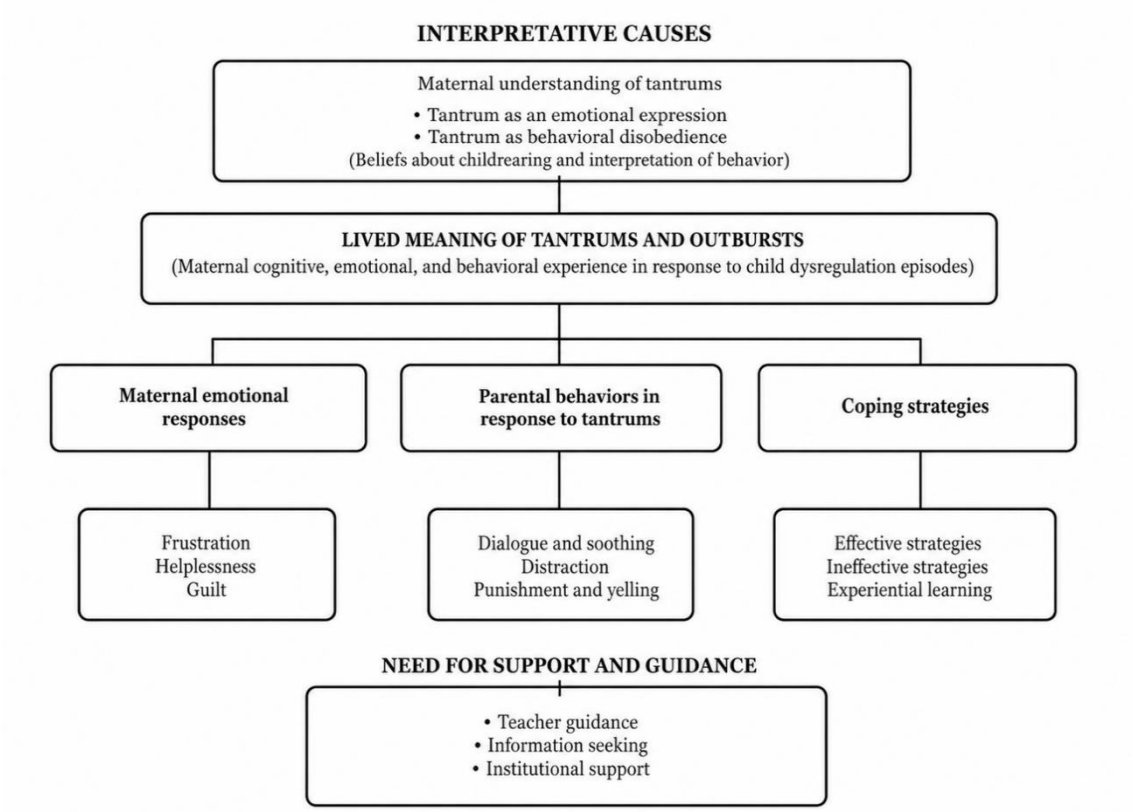
Data analysis followed grounded theory procedures. In the first stage, open coding was applied to identify emerging concepts and categories from the participants' narratives. Subsequently, axial coding established relationships among categories and subcategories, recognizing conditions, interactions, and consequences linked to the phenomenon. Finally, selective coding allowed for integration and refinement of categories around a central category, yielding an integrative model of the meaning mothers attribute to tantrums. This model reflects how they understand, interpret, experience, and cope with these episodes within family life and child-rearing contexts.

Regarding ethical considerations, the principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice were respected. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, anonymity was ensured through testimonial coding, confidentiality of provided information was maintained, and participants' right to withdraw voluntarily at any time without consequences was respected.

Results

Qualitative analysis through open, axial, and selective coding resulted in the emergence of five interrelated central categories, describing how mothers understand, emotionally experience, and cope with childhood tantrums in their daily lives.

Figure 1. *Semantic network of the lived meaning of tantrums and outbursts*



Note. *Elaborated by the authors based on qualitative interview analysis (ATLAS.ti).*

From the maternal perspective, tantrums emerge as complex and ambivalent emotional events that go beyond the child's observable behavior. They constitute relational experiences that engage maternal identity, parental competence, and the caregivers' own capacity for emotional regulation.

Category 1. Maternal understanding of tantrums

Mothers' interpretation of tantrums is a complex process of meaning construction, shaped by personal experiences, child-rearing beliefs, situational emotions, and knowledge of child development. In their accounts, mothers do not present tantrums merely as problematic behaviors but as everyday situations that prompt them to reflect both on their children's behavior and on their own parenting performance. In most cases, they interpret tantrums as emotional expressions linked to frustration, fatigue, or a need for attention, recognizing that children still have difficulty expressing their feelings due to their emotional development. This understanding favors responses based on calm, listening, and containment. However, when tantrums occur in public spaces or become excessively prolonged, they tend to be perceived as acts of disobedience or challenges to authority, associated with manipulation or a lack of boundaries. Both interpretations coexist and vary according to the mother's emotional state and the social circumstances.

Subcategory: Tantrum as emotional expression

Mothers understand tantrums as emotional reactions typical of development, linked to frustration, fatigue, and children's difficulties in verbally expressing their needs and emotions.

[Childhood disappointment]
[Difficulty expressing oneself]

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[Need for attention]
[Emotional immaturity]

Representative quotes:

"My child throws a tantrum because he gets frustrated when he can't say what he wants" ([Difficulty expressing oneself]).

"I think it's because he's tired or sleepy, he doesn't know how to say it" ([Emotional immaturity]).

"Sometimes he does it because he needs me to pay attention to him" ([Need for attention]).

"He gets angry when something doesn't work out or he doesn't get what he wants" ([Childhood frustration]).

The subcategory tantrum as emotional expression groups maternal discourses in which tantrums are understood as manifestations of socioemotional development. Mothers think that children experience very strong emotions that they cannot yet control or verbalize, so they use crying, screaming, or impulsive actions to communicate emotionally.

From this perspective, the tantrum is seen as the result of frustration, tiredness, hunger, a need for attention, or difficulty managing external limits. This understanding reflects an empathetic attitude toward the child, in which the behavior is not viewed as a negative intentional act but as a signal of affective or emotional need. Consequently, mothers tend to respond with containment, dialogue, or emotional accompaniment, recognizing the tantrum as a natural part of the growth and emotional learning process.

Subcategory: Tantrum as behavioral disobedience

In other scenarios, mothers attribute tantrums to intentional behaviors aimed at challenging authority, manipulating the adult, or evading established limits.

[Disobedience]
[Child manipulation]
[Seeking control]
[Lack of boundaries]

Representative quotes:

"I think sometimes he does it to manage me and get what he wants" ([Child manipulation]).

"He knows what he's doing, he does it to disobey" ([Disobedience]).

"I think it's because I've allowed too much, and now he wants to do whatever he wants" ([Lack of boundaries]).

"In the street he does it more, like so we'll give him what he asks for" ([Seeking control]).

This subcategory links tantrums to behavioral disobedience and a lack of boundaries. It predominates in public contexts or when tantrums are very frequent, connecting with traditional parenting models where obedience is a core value. By perceiving intentionality or manipulation in the child, mothers orient their responses toward corrective measures and the reestablishment of authority.

Category 2. Maternal emotional responses

Children's tantrums act as triggers of intense emotional responses in mothers, directly influencing their intervention styles. Participants described these episodes as highly demanding situations that generate a considerable emotional load, oscillating between stress in the moment and guilt that arises afterward. Maintaining calm is often difficult given the intensity of crying or screaming, resulting in an emotional dynamic that affects the interaction with the child.

Subcategory: Frustration

Codes:

[Maternal stress]
[Loss of control]
[Emotional exhaustion]

Quotes:

"It overwhelms me because I don't know how to calm him down" ([Loss of control]).
"I feel stressed, especially when I'm tired" ([Emotional exhaustion]).
"I get nervous when he starts screaming" ([Maternal stress]).

Frustration arises from the gap between maternal expectations of obedience and the child's actual behavior. The repetition of these episodes, especially during times of fatigue, increases irritability and generates emotional wear that hinders the application of more reflective parenting strategies.

Subcategory: Helplessness

[[Lack of strategies]
[Parental insecurity]

Quotes:
"I feel like nothing I do works" ([Lack of strategies]).
"I don't know how to react without yelling at him" ([Parental insecurity]).
"I feel helpless because I don't understand what he wants" ([Lack of strategies]).

This emotion reflects parental insecurity and a lack of guidance in emotion regulation. There is an internal conflict between the desire to engage in positive parenting and the practical difficulty of implementing it in high-intensity emotional situations, which heightens the sense of helplessness in mothers.

Subcategory: Subsequent guilt

[Remorse]
[Maternal reflection]

Quotes:
"Afterward I feel bad for having yelled at him" ([Remorse]).
"I think I should have been more patient" ([Maternal reflection]).
"Sometimes I start crying because I feel I did it wrong" ([Remorse]).

Guilt reveals a process of moral evaluation in which the mother recognizes that her reaction may have emotionally affected the child. Although painful, this emotion promotes learning and the search for more empathetic coping strategies for future episodes, acting as a driver of transformation in educational practices.

Category 3. Parental behaviors in response to tantrums

This category describes the immediate actions mothers employ to respond to tantrums. These behaviors do not occur in isolation but constitute adaptive responses that vary according to maternal stress levels, the intensity of the outburst, and the presence of others. A set of interventions was identified that ranges from affective regulation strategies to punitive responses.

Subcategory: Dialogue and containment

Codes:
[Emotional accompaniment]
[Affective communication]

Quotes:
"I try to talk to him and explain calmly" ([Affective communication]).
"I hug him until he calms down" ([Emotional accompaniment]).
"I tell him I understand he's upset" ([Emotional accompaniment]).

These behaviors reflect a reflective and empathetic parenting style. Mothers validate the child's emotion and attempt to calm him or her through physical contact and a soft tone of voice. They acknowledge, however, that applying this containment is extremely difficult in contexts of accumulated fatigue or under the judgmental gaze of others.

Subcategory: Distraction

Codes:
[Attention shift]
[Immediate strategy]

Quotes:
"I give him a toy to calm him down" ([Attention shift]).
"I put on cartoons so he stops crying" ([Immediate strategy]).
"I try to distract him with something else" ([Attention shift]).

Distraction functions as a practical and immediately relieving tool. However, mothers recognize that while it reduces the intensity of the tantrum instantly, it does not teach the child to process or self-regulate frustration, potentially favoring the repetition of the behavior in the long term by acting as an indirect reinforcer.

Subcategory: Punishment or yelling

Codes:
[Yelling]
[Mild physical punishment]
[Threats]

Quotes:
"Sometimes I yell at him because I can't take it anymore" ([Yelling]).
"I give him a slap when he misbehaves" ([Mild physical punishment]).
"I tell him I'm going to punish him if he doesn't calm down" ([Threats]).

These punitive practices are related to high levels of frustration and helplessness. Although they often generate immediate obedience out of fear, mothers question their educational effectiveness and express subsequent feelings of guilt, reflecting the ongoing tension between maintaining behavioral control and promoting respectful parenting.

Category 4. Coping strategies

Coping strategies encompass the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral resources mothers develop to manage tantrums and regulate their own responses. These strategies do not arise from formal training but from a gradual learning process based on daily experience and trial and error. Mothers continuously evaluate the effectiveness of their actions, adjusting their practices based on lived experiences.

Subcategory: Perceived effective strategies

[Maintaining calm]
[Waiting time]
[Subsequent dialogue]

"When I calm myself first, he also calms down" ([Maintaining calm]).
"I wait for him to calm down and then we talk" ([Waiting time]).
"Afterward I explain to him why it was wrong" ([Subsequent dialogue]).

Mothers identify that their own calm is an indispensable prerequisite for the child's regulation. Strategies such as waiting time and subsequent dialogue allow the conflict to be addressed from a reflective rather than reactive standpoint, marking a transition toward more conscious parenting practices centered on child development.

Subcategory: Ineffective strategies

[Negative reinforcement]
[Impulsive response]

"When I give him what he wants, he does it again later" ([Negative reinforcement]).
"Yelling at him doesn't work, it only makes things worse" ([Impulsive response]).
"Punishing him sometimes doesn't change anything" ([Impulsive response]).

Giving in to the child's demands to avoid a tantrum or responding with yelling are recognized as pedagogical errors. Identifying these strategies as ineffective stems from post-episode reflection, prompting mothers to seek respectful parenting alternatives.

Subcategory: Learning through experience

Trial and error]
[Everyday learning]

"I've learned little by little from what happens to me every day" ([Everyday learning]).
"I used to react worse; now I try to control myself more" ([Trial and error]).
"I'm seeing what works with my child" ([Everyday learning]).

Coping with tantrums constitutes a process of informal, situated learning. Mothers construct their role through direct experience, transforming errors and guilt into practical knowledge. This empirical know-how highlights, in turn, the importance of professional support that validates and systematizes their efforts.

Category 5. Need for support and guidance

This category reveals, across all narratives, that mothers perceive insufficient training resources and social support for managing child emotional dysregulation. Despite developing empirical strategies, they express a clear need for external guidance to understand their children's behavior and gain confidence in their parenting practices, identifying three main support resources.

Subcategory: Teacher guidance

[Teacher support]
[Trust in the teacher]

"The teacher explained to me that it's normal at his age" ([Teacher support]).
"I trust what his teacher tells me" ([Trust in the teacher]).

The teacher serves as a fundamental bridge between pedagogical knowledge and family practice. Their guidance helps demystify tantrums, explaining them as a normal part of socioemotional development, which reduces parental anxiety and promotes more understanding parenting practices.

Subcategory: Information seeking

[Internet]
[Family advice]

"I look online for how to handle tantrums" ([Internet]).
"My mom advises me on how to raise him" ([Family advice]).

This search reflects active, reflective motherhood that wishes to improve its practices. However, mothers express doubts about the validity of online information, which sometimes generates confusion or inconsistent application of guidelines, underscoring the need for professional guidance.

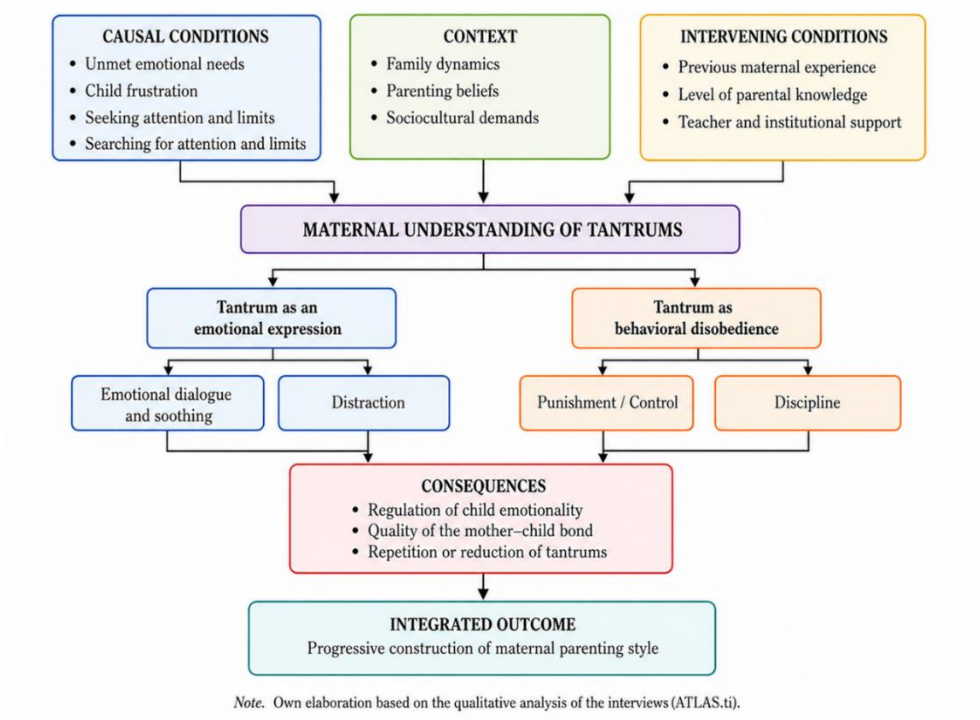
Subcategory: Institutional support

[Need for workshops]
[Psychological guidance]

"They should give us parenting workshops" ([Need for workshops]).
"It would be good to have psychological support" ([Psychological guidance]).
"Sometimes you feel alone in this" ([Need for support]).

The demand for workshops and psychological support highlights the loneliness of parenting and the insufficiency of institutional networks in the rural Curimarca context. Mothers express that systematic professional support would reduce emotional burden, prevent maltreatment, and strengthen parental competencies for family well-being.

Figure 2. *Integrative model of the lived meaning of tantrums, constructed from qualitative analysis of maternal interviews through axial and selective coding based on grounded theory.*



Note. Own elaboration based on the qualitative analysis of the interviews (ATLAS.ti).

Interpretive description of the model

The integrative model represents findings derived from qualitative analysis through axial and selective coding, explaining the lived meaning of childhood tantrums from the maternal perspective, articulating causes, conditions, the central phenomenon, and its consequences. Causal conditions consist of the child's unmet emotional needs, childhood frustration, and attention-seeking, triggers that arise when the infant still lacks self-regulation skills.

Contextual conditions encompass family dynamics, traditional parenting beliefs, and sociocultural demands that pressure the mother regarding her child's behavior. Intervening conditions include mothers' previous experience, access to parenting information, and support received from teachers or institutions, elements that influence how they interpret and respond to tantrums. The central phenomenon identified is maternal understanding of these episodes, which fluctuates between viewing them as an emotional manifestation of development or as disobedient behavior.

This interpretation guides the strategies mothers employ. When tantrums are understood as emotional expressions, accompaniment, dialogue, containment, and distraction tend to predominate. Conversely, when perceived as disobedience, control mechanisms, reprimands, punishment, or yelling are more common. These responses have direct effects on the child's emotional regulation, the quality of the mother–child relationship, and the frequency with which tantrums recur. Taken together, the findings enable the proposal of an integrative model in which maternal parenting style is progressively constructed and redefined through lived experiences, personal reflection, and everyday learning.

The model shows that maternal responses to the same tantrum depend not only on its intensity or frequency but on the meaning mothers attribute to it. When interpreted as an emotional expression linked to affective needs or self-regulation difficulties, mothers tend to respond with support and containment. When perceived as disobedience, control and discipline strategies predominate. This helps explain why parenting practices may vary in similar situations.

Likewise, the model identifies aspects that could be strengthened through parenting education programs, such as beliefs about child-rearing, knowledge of socioemotional development, and emotion management skills. These findings provide a basis for designing strategies that promote a broader understanding of tantrums and foster more sensitive parenting practices.

From a methodological standpoint, the study offers an emerging theory built from the mothers' own experiences, enabling understanding of the phenomenon from the perspective of those who live it daily.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that mothers in Curimarca interpret their children's tantrums as complex experiences involving emotional, cognitive, and relational dimensions of parenting. These results align with the literature on socioemotional competencies, which holds that disruptive behaviors in early childhood represent difficulties in emotional regulation processes rather than deliberate intentions to challenge norms (Denham, 2020; Thompson, 2019).

From developmental neuropsychology, tantrums can be understood as a consequence of the gradual maturation of executive functions and brain mechanisms involved in emotional regulation. During the preschool period, the prefrontal cortex has not yet reached full development, making it difficult for children to control impulses and handle frustrating situations appropriately (Diamond, 2013; Zelazo & Carlson, 2020). In this context, tantrums constitute an expected expression of emotional self-regulation capacities still in formation (Montroy et al., 2019). The results coincide with Guerrero (2018), who argues that tantrums reflect limited neuropsychological maturity of self-control; therefore, affective containment and empathic caregiver responses are essential for fostering the learning of emotional regulation strategies.

Similarly, the way mothers interpret tantrums was found to depend largely on the circumstances in which they occur. In stressful situations or under social pressure, tantrums are more likely to be perceived as acts of disobedience, increasing the probability of punitive responses. This result is consistent with studies showing that caregivers' emotional states influence parenting practices and their ability to respond sensitively to children's emotions (Morris et al., 2020; Breaux et al., 2024).

The emotional intensity described by mothers, expressed in feelings of frustration, helplessness, and subsequent guilt, highlights the demands inherent to parenting, especially in rural contexts with limited support resources. Various studies have shown that caregivers' emotional responses directly influence the development of children's emotion regulation skills (Eisenberg et al., 2019; Gottman et al., 2019). Moreover, mothers tend to construct their coping strategies from daily experience and trial-and-error learning, an informal learning process previously described in parenting studies (Simaes et al., 2024).

The model also supports the assertions of Bornstein (2012) by showing that parenting practices are shaped not only by culture but also by the specific conditions of rural contexts, where access to psychological counseling and family support is often limited. It further aligns with Gottman et al. (2019) and Morris et al. (2020), in evidencing that maternal responses depend not solely on emotional competencies but also on the interpretation mothers construct about the meaning of the tantrum.

Collectively, the proposed model suggests that maternal understanding acts as a bridge between environmental conditions and parenting practices. This perspective is particularly relevant for designing interventions in Andean rural contexts, where beliefs, experiences, and meanings attributed by mothers play a key role in children's socioemotional development and the strengthening of parental competencies.

Conclusions

This research provided an in-depth understanding of the meanings that mothers from the rural Curimarca community attribute to their preschoolers' tantrums, revealing that these constitute a complex emotional and relational phenomenon that transcends observable behavior and is embedded in family system dynamics. It is concluded that mothers construct two basic narratives: the tantrum as emotional immaturity, a manifestation consistent with developmental age or behavioral negativity, a transaction with specific objectives and outcomes. Both interpretations coexist dynamically and determine familial interventions.

It is also concluded that children's tantrums provoke intense maternal responses, comprising frustration and helplessness, followed by guilt. These emotions are indicative of role overload and insufficient access to resources in the rural context. The experience of these emotions directly informs educational choices and the gradual construction of maternal identity, where subsequent guilt acts as a common motivator for reflection that drives the search for more compassionate parenting guidance in later contexts.

Regarding parenting practices, mothers employ a variety of adaptive behaviors ranging from emotional regulation strategies (dialogue and affirmation) to reactive responses (yelling or punishment). These behaviors are selected according to the interpretation of the tantrum, the emotional state, and social pressure. Although mothers develop coping strategies based on daily experience and trial and error, they express an urgent need for professional guidance to gain confidence and consistency in their pedagogical practices.

Finally, the integrative model offers an account of how mothers understand childhood tantrums and how this understanding has consequences for parenting. As an explanatory response, it shows that maternal parenting practices differ depending on whether the tantrum is understood as emotional or as a display of disobedient behavior. As a practical response, it shows how modifiable factors, such as parenting

skills, knowledge of child development, or parental competencies, can be worked on and taught through parenting education programs. As a methodological response, it develops substantive theory in an emergent fashion from the mothers' own experiences, generating a conceptual foundation for future research and interventions in the field of parenting and child emotion regulation.

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