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## Need to work healthy couple relationships from socio-educational contexts

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## Abstract

In this article, we present a reflection based on a doctoral thesis on the need to promote healthy couple relationships in socio-educational contexts. It is justified the need to establish a comprehensive education in all dimensions of the person; and based on it, work on affective aspects, and specifically, the image of a healthy couple, directly related to the prevention of gender violence and other diverse problems of the current society. It is considered that this has to be done from the school age, because the imaginary ones -and among them, the image of what the partner has to be, is formed since early youth, and especially in adolescence. It is proposed, for this, to work through arts and creativity, through an art-therapeutic process: perceive-internalize-express. The results of research confirm the effectiveness of this methodology, since it consolidates learning and facilitates cognitive emotional integration -includible to build healthy identities-.

**Keywords:** Art and creativity, affective education, comprehensive education, couple relationships.

## Introduction

For years, we have been working on the importance of images in personal and social construction; at the same time that we discovered the possibilities of the use of artistic and creative therapies for mediation and intervention, both educational and social [1]. On the other hand, we are also interested in education and we are concerned that despite what the laws proclaim and the research and programs developed in this line, we know from our experience [2] that educational practices continue to ignore fundamental aspects, such as affective-emotional education.

This text is not about differentiating between concepts (emotion, feeling affect, mood, passion, all of them related); we are interested in including especially affectivity, by the positive or negative assessment it may have; neither is it intended to analyze the presence or not of emotional (feelings) in the classrooms; we only insist on the need to work on healthy couple relationships from socio-educational contexts, especially when we intend an comprehensive education.

## Comprehensive education

When the development of the human being is studied from evolutionary psychology, it is considered in an comprehensive way, taking into account physical, psychological, emotional and social aspects; something that the educational laws of the last years also proclaim, at least, in their principles as necessity. The Organic Law of General Regulation of the Educational System (LOGSE, 1990) in Spain, establishes in

article 2 that the educational activity is aimed at personalized training; and that it must promote an comprehensive education of the students in knowledge, skills and moral values in all areas of personal, family, social and professional life. The same, in one way or another, are pointing out the different educational laws that have been enacted in our country, as stated in Article 71 of the Organic Law of Education, currently in force: "Educational administrations shall provide the necessary means so that all students reach the maximum personal, intellectual, social and emotional development." (Organic Law of Education, 2006: 17179)

In this sense, the Andalusian educational administration (Junta de Andalucía, 2016) develops (from the 2001-2003 academic period) educational programs in schools such as "*Escuela, espacio de paz*" ("The school, a space for peace"), recognizing these centers since 2007 as Positive Living Co-sponsors, and forming part of the actions of the Ministry of Education of the Junta de Andalucía in matters of coexistence and equality. Other intervention programs are also being worked on; for example, in the case of the European Program of Educational Intervention *Golden 5* (Lera, 2009), which was performed in several countries from 2010 to 2014 [3], and in which it is sustained that schools have important responsibilities in the education of future citizens, as well as in the development of healthy attitudes towards themselves, others and society. However, they are only isolated proposals; numerous, but not sufficient; because in daily routine, evaluation criteria and standards are what actually govern the teaching/learning processes, prioritizing only certain cognitive aspects.

The importance of comprehensive education and the decisive role that affectivity plays in it as a basic comprehensive part of human development cannot be dissolved -as it occurs- in curricular designs: what is not designed and worked explicitly remains hidden. Therefore, we should aim to clearly integrate affective education in curricular designs, so as not to continue perpetuating values and attitudes in many cases harmful to the development of persons, families, and ultimately society.

### **Need to foster couple relationships from socio-educational contexts**

In Spain, the Organic Law on Comprehensive Protection Measures against Gender Violence (2004) insists on prevention and education. Healthy couple relationships are fundamental for the quality of life, for a healthy society, and sentimental education is an instrument to favor changing towards positive attitudes. The relevance of working on this topic, especially in adolescence, is clear to break myths -too deep-rooted- and to avoid the lack of self-esteem, -another essential factor-, which make possible the acceptance of abuses masked, in principle, by romantic love or by endless cycles of forgiveness-violence. In this regard, Sorensen (2007) recommends the importance of teaching adolescents the characteristics of healthy relationships, to differentiate a healthy relationship from an insane one, and how to seek help if they are in harmful affective relationships, since while healthy romantic relationships have many potential benefits for young people, unhealthy relationships pose risks that can have a lasting impact. Today, there are many authors who investigate the abusive problems that arise in teenage relationships (Gonzalez and Santana 2001, Wolfe and Feiring, 2000) and the effects that romantic teenage relationships can have on self-esteem and values related to adolescents, couple relationships and sexuality (Barber and Eccles, 2003).

Therefore, it is important to start training from school; however, most of the educational programs in which couple relationships are worked on, do so under the label of “sexual education”. However, some people work the affective and emotional component, but most of the time addressing them from the prevention of gender violence (Ferrer, 2002).

García-Piña (2016) points out that all types of sex education should be aimed at providing a healthy comprehensive development, fostering gender roles that promote respect, and fair and equitable relationships between girls and boys. In this sense, our research starts from the positive current of psychology (Seligman, 1990), and although it indirectly works to prevent gender violence, it is especially concerned with the roles we assume, focusing on developing the characteristics that present healthy couple relationships based on the images that we have of it.

We must consider that couple affective relationships are at the center of life, providing positive or negative experiences that can influence children and adolescents in their short-term development, but, above all, in the long term; in large part, this is lived in families: as family relationships are healthier, relationships outside the family are also better, and all this has an impact on social relationships. It is interesting to achieve, in general, more positive and healthy interpersonal relationships. Teaching young people to recognize the characteristics of healthy relationships and helping them develop the communication and interpersonal skills necessary to create healthy relationships ensures that they have meaningful and rewarding relationships, both in adolescence and adulthood (Medina, Reyes and Villar, 2009).

For this (what was exposed above), affective-emotional education is important; regarding couple relationships, it is fundamental, because without a clear understanding of what a healthy relationship is, adolescents can tolerate affectionate but ‘risky’ couple relationships. For example, it can be easy for a teenager to interpret jealousy or the fact of feeling watched -such as receiving constant calls or text messages- as a sign of love, instead of seeing such behavior as a warning signal, which should become preventive when establishing or maintaining this relationship.

Healthy relationships help young people shape their identity and develop interpersonal skills (communication, negotiation, empathy, and learning how to maintain intimate relationships). Young people become more autonomous from their parents when their couples constitute strong emotional support (Furman, 2002). Halford and Bodenmann (2013) propose to educate the couple promoting communication to encourage the

satisfaction of the same, and to build a healthy couple. However, despite the fact that in Spain there has been a lot of progress regarding the rejection of physical or sexual violence, as pointed out by Gerardo Meil (2013), -professor of Sociology at *Universidad Autónoma de Madrid* and director of the report on perception of violence of gender in Spain-, some people do not know what gender violence is, and, unfortunately, it is enough to listen to the news to verify that there are too many cases, and that they are increasing. For this reason, it is warned about the stereotypes that survive on aggressors and victims; there are less recognized and subtle forms of abuse, but they still are gender violence and should not be tolerated; as for example devaluation (10% and 8% %, respectively), verbal threats (7% and 6%) or the control by the aggressor of the schedules, friendships, way of dressing, etc. of the victim, which according to this report, is tolerated by 32% of men and 29% of women. It is therefore necessary to educate in all this, starting from the perceptions and the imaginary that, from the emotional, ends up conditioning our relationships, since it affects by determining what we expect, how we face and then accept reality, arising from it, in many cases, disappointments and conflicts.

### **The image of a healthy couple**

The implications and the power of society and family are evident, but also especially of the media in the construction of the imaginaries that condition and affect both personal and social development, and specifically, in the image of what we believe a couple must be. From schools, in the search for comprehensive education, affective-emotional education does not get enough care, nor attention is paid to the exposure of minors (increasingly younger) to images that have a strong impact on their sexual development; children and young people are shaping an “image” of what the role of man should be, that of women, how affective and sexual relationships should be, what is the image of an ideal couple, etc. which are generally not healthy, or which leads to: “Erroneous, distorted and incomprehensible manifestations of sexuality” (García-Piña, 2016: 48).

It becomes clear, therefore, the need for training that includes emotional education, allowing children and adolescents to build a healthy identity and healthy relationships, something that in today’s

society should be worked from images: the images that we have, that we build, and which condition our way of understanding the world, of being in it. (Aznárez López, Granados Conejo and Callejón Chinchilla, 2006).

Today, it is necessary to work with visual cultural contents (own and other people’s photographs, advertising images, audiovisuals, etc.), not only because they are close to the daily life of children and adolescents, but also because they allow to learn with greater motivation and effectiveness.

### **Art and creativity as a resource: art therapy**

For many years, we have also been defending the preventive application of art therapy, even in schools; the possibilities of the use of art, of artistic and creative activities as a useful resource to favor comprehensive, social and emotional development (Callejón Chinchilla and Granados Conejo, 2003, Granados Conejo and Callejón Chinchilla, 2010).

Although there are many possible techniques, in particular, in the germ investigation of this article, visual narratives have been used, starting with viewing films (cinema) and ending with proposals for the creation of images and related texts (illustrated stories) ; all this, integrated into an art-therapy process with the intention of working with couple images, from the *perception* -to be aware of deception-, *internalization* -to reflect on it-, and move towards the *expression* of healthy couple images ( Gila Ordóñez, 2016).

Cinema is a powerful tool to work on healthy relationships in socio-educational contexts, both for its socializing power as a means of mass communication, and for being an artistic stimulus, triggering emotions and cognitions, very effective. As Campayo (2009) points out, the audiovisual format is the best way to remember and to learn, because knowledge is contextualized, as if it were real. To get in touch with a fictional message allows (oneself) to identify with it, with the personal ones (Chory-Assad and Cichirillo, 2005), and to reflect on oneself, on one’s own reality from other perspectives, from outside, from a safe context; in addition, the artistic format reaches emotions more easily and motivates for their learning (Gila Ordóñez, 2016).

Igartua (2016), professor at the Audiovisual Communication and Publicity Knowledge Area of

the University of Salamanca and Director of the Audiovisual Content Observatory (OCA, for its initials in Spanish), and who has been investigating the impact of artistic narratives on viewers since 1991, affirms that the factors that explain the enormous emotional impact that the cinema has are the processes of identification with the characters and the empathy that develops towards them [the processes of identification with the characters and the empathy developed towards them constitute the factors that explain the enormous emotional impact caused by cinema.

For this reason, it is usual in educational and social contexts to use cinema for learning values, and in clinical and health contexts, even in a therapeutic way. As Pereira and Urpí (2004) point out, cinema - and, in general, the entire audiovisual world - has become the informal school of society, and especially of today's youth, as a model, among other aspects, of sexual behavior and affective relationships.

For this reason, it is usual in educational and social contexts to use cinema for learning values, as well as in health contexts, even in a therapeutic way. As Pereira and Urpí (2004) point out, cinema - and, in general, the entire audiovisual world- has become a model of sexual behavior and affective relationships in the informal school of society, and especially of today's youth, among other aspects.

We do not intend to enter here into the various uses of cinema as a tool; just as an example, we can point out, by the similarity with our interest, how Cape (2009) uses films to involve, clarify and educate medical students about the popular myths on drugs addiction (including alcohol).

Besides cinema, other narrative techniques have been used in the research carried out, specifically, written narrations (which can be in the form of a story, fable, novel, monologue...), illustrated with images that represent and symbolize; they reflect aspects of the story that sometimes are not visible in another way, and allow us to obtain information about the context, relationships, etc.; and to establish connections between the story and how people think, feel or live, increasing their transforming potential. As in cinema, a story can be observed again and again, because it has been captured and changed in each perspective, making it possible to work on the change towards more positive stories.

Callejón Chinchilla and Granados Conejo (2003) point out that the use of artistic activities, in general, in addition to stimulating learning and developing creativity -and therefore taking perspectives and solving problems- could serve to prevent different types of difficulties, both cognitive and emotional, for being a discipline capable of promoting the expression of feelings, thoughts and emotions, as well as reflection on it and the motivation for action, which facilitates self-knowledge and promotes interaction, socio-emotional relationships, meeting with others and with the environment.

### **The art-therapeutic process: perceive-internalize-express**

In art therapy, it is worked with a preventive or therapeutic intention; the process is fundamental. In our proposal points out, as it has already been done, from the sequence: perception-internalization-expression (PIE, for its initials in Spanish): working on emotions and thoughts, at perceptive level (cinema viewing), at the level of analysis of the information received (analysis sheet and guided group discussion), and encouraging expression (illustrated narrative). If cinema becomes the trigger and the intermediate step is fundamental in the cognitive aspect, creation becomes the instrument that consolidates learning, in an art-therapeutic process.

Art therapy, according to Granados Conejo and Callejón Chinchilla (2010), facilitates the "realization" of aspects of oneself and of relationships with others, fostering the fact of taking responsibility for one's own life; it would allow to make conscious aspects that are not (conscious), promoting the expression of the feelings, in order to be able to work on them; bringing to light painful aspects, difficulties and conflicts of which it is difficult for us to speak or situations that need to be ordered, since it favors through projection, displacement through metaphor and symbolism, to approach these situations by the anxiety that they provoke arising from adversity, overcome them and leave them strengthened.

Nor can we ignore the flow experience, the intrinsic motivation and the resilience that the artistic creation itself provokes, which facilitates the acceptance and the processes of changes, through the new artistic creations; and it allows to revive the

feelings present when it was created; just looking at it, creation fosters the positive vision of oneself thanks to self-reward, self-esteem and self-worth.

The proposed methodology, based on art therapy, is founded on an approach that allows to integrate emotion and reason, both necessary to achieve the objectives we propose: to favor the change of imaginary, beliefs and harmful and irrational attitudes regarding couple relationships, fostering other healthier ones with respect to them, (which are) difficult to modify, even knowing that they are wrong.

## Conclusions

In the process of this investigation, due to the conversations held in the group dynamics and the in-depth interviews with each of the participants, we observed the need to work on couples relationships because, besides observing an evident need to talk about these issues, it is common cases in which unhealthy experiences and attitudes are reported in relation to couple relationships; obvious and, unfortunately, generalized shortcomings are observed. Therefore, we consider the need to address affective-emotional education, paying attention to this aspect, (which is) directly related to social behavior and especially to the prevention of gender violence, family breakdown and other various individual and family problems of current society; we have to do it, from an early age and from all fronts.

On the other hand, from the positive results of this research, it can be deduced that not only is it necessary, but also, it is adequate the use of methodologies and resources that work through the arts and creativity, since they allow a cognitive-emotional integration, (which is) inescapable to build healthy identities. In fact, most of the participants point to it as one of the most positive aspects of the experience.

This justifies further research in this line, and encourages us to develop concrete intervention proposals, for different ages, which can be carried out in socio-cultural and educational areas.

## Footnotes

[1] It can be seen in the different publications of the authors, which has also led them, among other occupations, to the coordination of RedVisual magazine -<http://www.redvisual.net>- (focused on the relationships between visual culture, audiovisual media and education), and the SocialArt publishing house (one of whose aims is the dissemination of materials on social art, artistic education and creative therapies).

[3] Reference is made, specifically, to this program, because the authors of the text had previously collaborated (in 2004) with the coordinator, carrying out an art-therapy program for the improvement of school coexistence in a secondary school, working with stalkers and victims through arts and creativity.

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