



# **XV BIENNIAL INTERNATIONAL TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING CONFERENCE**

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**Getting Transformation into Good Trouble:  
Making new spaces of possibility  
with community and in practice**

# **PROCEEDINGS**

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# Getting Transformation into Good Trouble: Making new spaces of possibility with community and in practice

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# PAPERS

## **ADHD and Families: Transformative Learning and Parenting Support Extended abstract**

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**Abstract:** Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by persistent patterns of inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity that interfere with daily functioning and development (APA, 2022). Educating a hyperactive child disrupts the balance of family relationships. Indeed, ADHD can profoundly alter family structures by triggering intense emotions that are challenging to manage and by making interactions complex and problematic (Anastopoulos et al., 2009; Bullegas et al., 2023; Theule et al., 2011).

Through participatory action research, this study explores the transformative potential of Parental Reflective Groups (PRG) as an innovative approach to provide parenting support for families dealing with ADHD (Bullegas & Mura, 2023; Mura & Bullegas, 2021). PRGs represent a methodological approach, aimed at facilitating critical reflection on parenting practices. Twenty parents of children with ADHD participated in a six-month PRG program that included pre-training and post-training semi-structured interviews to detect changes in frame of references (e.g. premises and meanings about parental identity, ADHD, parent-child relationship, etc.) and educational practices. The findings underscore the potential of PRGs in assisting participants in critically analyzing their perspectives and supporting them in a process of personal growth and empowerment.

**Key Words:** Meaning Transformation, Educational Practices, ADHD, Reflective Practice, Parenting Support

### **Introduction**

Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by persistent patterns of inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity. (APA, 2022). These traits determine an impairment in the daily activities, interfering with the functioning of a person (Banaschewski et al., 2017).

ADHD changes families: educating a hyperactive child transforms the balance of relationships, activates intense emotions, and makes interactions more complex and problematic. Parents of children with ADHD perceive themselves as less competent and effective to regulate their children and have low expectations of their educational skills and competences. At the same time, the parent-child relationship is often characterized by negative disciplinary behaviors, ineffective strategies such as punishments; these strategies can consolidate a “reactive-negative” style distinguished by high levels of control, authoritarianism and emotional reactions of anger and frustration (Johnston & Ohan, 2005).

Faced with the educational challenges imposed by the presence of a child with ADHD, the family must “re-define “ itself in emotional, relational, and educational terms, even through parental support interventions.

### ADHD and Parenting: Towards a Transformative Paradigm

Intervention on ADHD cannot be limited to pharmacological and rehabilitative programs aimed at the person. Family and school intervention are also important in a multimodal approach to ADHD (Barkley, 2015). In this framework Parent Training (PT) becomes relevant (Coates et al., 2015). Parent Training is the main intervention with families. It provides information on ADHD characteristics, enabling the development of problem-solving skills and the acquisition of psychoeducational strategies for managing children’s behavioral issues (Anastopoulos et al., 1993).

It is also possible to highlight other types of interventions, aimed at modifying and enhancing the meanings and experiences of parents, through a parent education based on transformative learning theory (First & Way, 1995; Mezirow, 1991, 2000; Taylor & Hill, 2016; To et al., 2013). Such interventions are shaped through the principles of adult learning: in this framework, knowledge and practices are co-constructed through dialogue, discussion, and critical reflection.

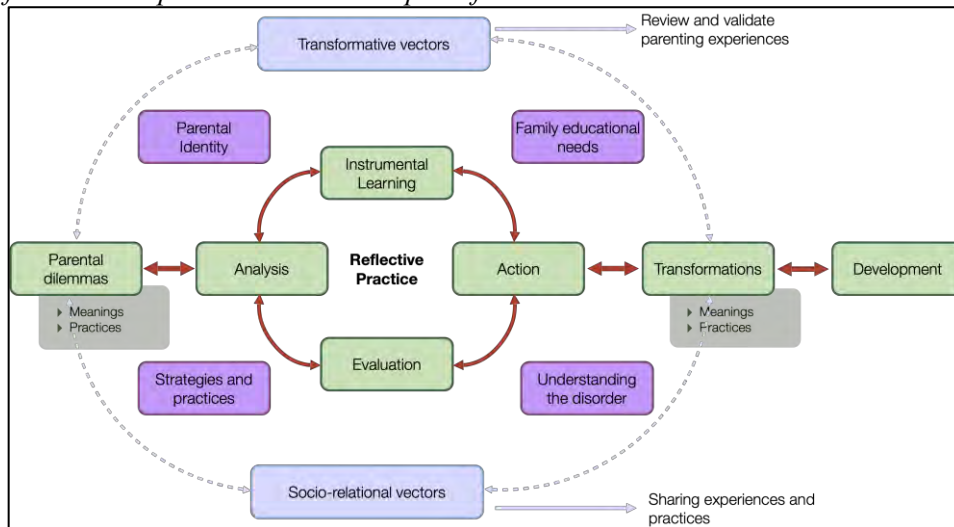
From this perspective, the family issues related to children with ADHD do not present themselves as well-formulated structures, solvable through certain solutions, but rather represent a complex interplay of factors, often tacit, influencing participants’ horizon of expectations.

### Parental Reflective Groups: Methodological and Operational Dimension

The enhancement of parents’ experiences and needs through a transformative approach to family education constitutes the theoretical-methodological basis for the definition of Parental Reflective Groups (Figure 1) (PRGs) (Bullegas & Mura, 2023; Mura & Bullegas, 2021). Within a participatory action-research framework, the PRGs are aimed at promoting critical reflection on the frames of reference and parenting practices.

**Figure 1**

*Parental Reflective Groups: theoretical-conceptual framework.*



Based on these considerations, the research is aimed at investigating the transformative impact of PRGs which involved twenty parents of children with ADHD. In this context, the families participated in an educational program consisting of twelve sessions, each lasting approximately two hours, spanning a total of six months.

The program was focused on significant topics and issues for the participants, including parental identity, parenting skills, understanding of the disorder, parent-child relationship, discipline, self-regulated strategies and more. Through group discussions and experiential activities, parents were encouraged to share their daily experiences and explore solutions to the challenges they encountered.

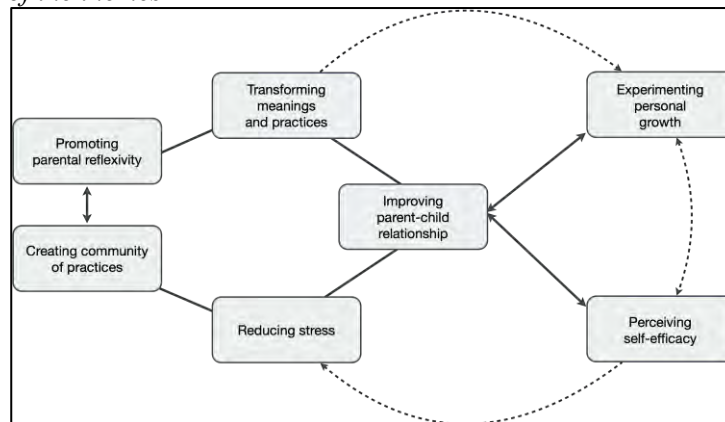
Data collection for this study involved: 1) before-training interviews to collect needs, perceptions, and parenting experiences about ADHD; 2) after-training interviews to investigate the transformative impact on the frames of reference and educational practices used by the parents. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed *ad verbatim*, with codes used instead of sensitive data. A Thematic Analysis was conducted on the transcripts, enabling a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the parent’s point of view on the training intervention (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

### Learning and Changing through Parental Reflective Groups

The thematic analysis of the interviews allowed the elaboration of some themes, which describe a transformative dynamic in the parents who participated in the PRG: 1) *promoting parental reflexivity*; 2) *transforming meanings and practices*; 3) *creating community of practice*; 4) *reducing stress*; 5) *improving parent-child relationship*; 6) *perceiving self-efficacy*; 7) *experimenting personal growth* (fig. 2).

**Figure 2**

*Visual representation of the themes*



Findings highlight the transformative impact of Parenting Reflection Groups. Participants reported a profound transformation in their frame of references (e.g. about ADHD, discipline, challenging behavior, parental belief, etc.) and educational practices. This has contributed to enhancing their sense of efficacy and competence, fostering a positive dynamic of personal and familial well-being. Furthermore, parents observed a reduction in stressful situations, which positively affected their relationships with their children, allowing them to experience a path of personal growth.

## Conclusion

This paper sought to determine whether the use of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000), in a parent education class could change the meaning perspective and educational practices of the participants.

Parental Reflective Groups appear to be a mode of intervention to support participants in a transformative process of personal and family empowerment. Through the PRGs, parents reported not only an enhancement in their understanding of ADHD and an improvement in parent-child relationships but also a profound personal growth and increased sense of self-efficacy. These outcomes underscore the potential of reflective practices in parent education not only to address the educative challenges of managing ADHD but also to foster a supportive community that enhances the overall resilience and functionality of families.

This study also contributes to extend the research on transformative learning as a useful framework for parental education. This is an evolving area of research that requires additional empirical exploration to further validate the range of educational interventions aimed at supporting families dealing with ADHD.

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