

# THEATER AS A THERAPEUTIC RESOURCE FOR THE PREVENTION OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE: TEENAGERS' PERCEPTION

*Teatro como recurso terapêutico na prevenção ao uso de drogas: percepção de adolescentes*

*Teatro como recurso terapéutico para la prevención de uso de drogas: percepción de adolescente*

Original Article

## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To understand the importance of theater as an occupational therapy resource for the prevention of substance abuse by teens enrolled in a community-based psychosocial project. **Methods:** A qualitative, descriptive study with a critical reflection approach held at a community center in the Community of Dendê, Fortaleza-Ceará. Data were collected from March to May 2009 in a group of ten (10) teenagers of both sexes, aged 12 to 18 years, who lived in socially vulnerable situations and participated in the GESTTO group (Group of Socio-theatrical Expressions in Occupational Therapy). A structured interview was used with a simple observation of groups of theatrical activities and a field book. The analysis of the empirical material was based on Orlandi's discourse analysis. **Results:** It was found that theatrical activities used as an occupational therapy resource constitute a powerful tool for the prevention of substance abuse, promoting increased self-esteem, the restructuring of the model of social identity, and the discovery of potentialities and abilities by teenagers so that they can become peer educators for the prevention of substance abuse in the community. **Conclusion:** The theatrical activity provided teenagers with a clear understanding of the use and abuse of illicit drugs, making them more sensitive to prevention and self-identity, making a significant change in their lives.

**Descriptors:** Street Drugs; Adolescent; Occupational Therapy.

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Compreender a importância da atividade teatral como recurso terapêutico ocupacional na prevenção ao uso de drogas ilícitas por adolescentes inseridos em um projeto psicossocial comunitário. **Métodos:** Estudo de natureza qualitativa, do tipo descritivo, sob a perspectiva crítico-reflexiva, realizado em um centro comunitário na Comunidade do Dendê, em Fortaleza-CE, cuja coleta de dados ocorreu de março a maio de 2009, tendo como sujeitos dez (10) adolescentes de ambos os sexos, na faixa etária de 12 a 18 anos, em situação de vulnerabilidade social, vinculados ao Grupo de Expressões Sócio-Teatrais em Terapia Ocupacional (GESTTO). Utilizou-se entrevista estruturada, observação simples dos grupos de atividades teatrais e diário de campo. A análise do material empírico se baseou na análise do discurso de Orlandi. **Resultados:** Evidenciou-se que as atividades teatrais, utilizadas como recurso terapêutico ocupacional, favorecem o aumento da autoestima, a reestruturação do modelo de identidade social e a descoberta de potencialidades e capacidades por parte dos adolescentes, para serem agentes multiplicadores na prevenção ao uso de drogas na comunidade. **Conclusão:** A atividade teatral proporcionou aos adolescentes esclarecimentos quanto ao uso e abuso de drogas ilícitas, tornando-os sensíveis à prevenção e autoidentidade, transformando seu cotidiano.

**Descritores:** Drogas Ilícitas; Adolescente; Terapia Ocupacional.

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## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Comprender la importancia de la actividad teatral como recurso terapéutico ocupacional para la prevención de uso de drogas ilícitas por adolescentes inseridos en un proyecto psicosocial comunitario. **Métodos:** Estudio de naturaleza cualitativa del tipo descriptivo en la perspectiva crítico-reflexivo realizado en el centro comunitario de la Comunidad del Dendê, Fortaleza-Ceará, cuya recogida de datos se dio entre marzo y mayo de 2009 con diez (10) adolescentes de ambos los sexos en la franja etaria de 12 a 18 años en situación de vulnerabilidad social, vinculados al Grupo GESTTO (Grupo de Expresiones Socio-Teatrales en Terapia Ocupacional). Se utilizó la entrevista estructurada, observación simple de los grupos de actividades teatrales y notas de campo. El análisis del material empírico fue basado en el análisis de discurso de Orlandi. **Resultados:** Se evidencio que las actividades de teatro utilizadas como recurso terapéutico ocupacional constituyen un potente recurso para la prevención de usos de drogas ilícitas, favoreciendo el aumento de la autoestima, la reestructuración del modelo de identidad social, la descubierta de potencialidades y capacidades de los adolescentes para ser agentes multiplicadores de la prevención de uso de drogas en la comunidad. **Conclusión:** La actividad teatral proporcionó a los adolescentes esclarecimiento sobre el uso y abuso de drogas ilícitas volviéndolos sensibles en relación a la prevención, auto identidad, cambiando su cotidiano experimentado anteriormente.

**Descriptores:** Drogas ilícitas; Adolescente; Terapia Ocupacional.

## INTRODUCTION

Drug use is as old as mankind itself, and its use should be noticed as a permanent human manifestation. The history of drugs use in different times, cultures and societies reveals that the human being seeks not only obtaining pleasure, but also the relief for tiredness, the forgetfulness of traumas and fears - especially fear of death - and the intentional modification of states of consciousness<sup>(1)</sup>.

The use of illicit drugs rises as a major public health problem by the extent of that use, the nature of new drugs, as well as the social effects (sociological, economic, and political) and health impacts (direct and indirect diseases and their treatments costs). The comprehension of such a complex problem requires different readings, intersectoral and interdisciplinary approach of more and more professionals from different fields, such as health, education, justice, police and social services<sup>(1)</sup>.

Adolescence is a peculiar phenomenon of the human being characterized as a transition period between puberty and adulthood. It is when the individuals recast the concepts about themselves and abandon the childish self-image, projecting themselves into the autonomous future. It is

known that adolescents experience significantly and rapidly changes. Besides the changes in their body, there are also changes in perceptions of themselves, others and the networks of relationships, meanings and roles<sup>(2)</sup>.

It is a critical time in human development, when the youngsters face new responsibilities and difficulties in making decisions, experiencing a natural conflict, characterized mainly by the vulnerability. It is a condition pervaded not only by the construction of identity and family relationships, but the situation of gender, rank and socio-cultural context<sup>(2)</sup>.

For adolescents, drug addiction becomes an assumed conduct for an unsustainable life project, in which communication between internal and external world is only feasible through the distortion of the lived realities or a new image of themselves: No more I, but I drugs<sup>(1)</sup>.

Youngsters use illicit drugs for various reasons, among which stands out the low self-esteem, that leads to a feeling of inadequacy and maladjustment when facing various life situations. Normally, they see on drugs an escape to problems that they do not want to face, as the troubled family relationships, difficulties in the studies or in the controversial relation with friends. Illicit drugs are seen as the magic solution that swallow up the condition being lived instantly, once the person gets rid of the problems they are facing at least for a moment<sup>(2)</sup>.

The interest on this study arose from the necessity of providing a therapeutic space for listening and expressing feelings in a community psychosocial project, with theatrical experiences in which young people in situations of social vulnerability could channel their personal identity to validate their expressive potential as a way of preventing the use of illicit drugs.

The research is the result of a theater group's performance and from situations experienced in the Group of Socio-Theatrical Expression in Occupational Therapy (*Grupo de Expressões Sócio-Teatrais em Terapia Ocupacional - GESTTO*). GESTTO was created in 2008 and it is composed of 12-18 year-old adolescents, as defined in the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (*Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente - ECA*), who live in the community of Dendê, and practice theatrical activities from a therapeutic perspective. The group meets at the community center, where they experience social and cultural activities, among which is the theater, aiming to experience critical reflections in order to prevent the use and abuse of illicit drugs.

The theatrical activities, as a psychosocial practice, intervene in the subject's life quality, causing them to expand their gaze to the new reality that concerns them, to their everyday life and their relationship with each other. They can be used as an interventional tool, once they allow social exchange and health promotion, investing in the

expansion of the horizon of its members' active life and the ability to create and act on their area of freedom<sup>(3)</sup>.

During the process, the interventions are carried out in a cozy ambience and in a relaxed way, through practices of awareness, body expression, dynamics of group integration, and spontaneous trials, followed by discussion on the covered topics and collective creation of solutions to existing problems<sup>(3)</sup>. The theatrical activities enable the representation of feelings and self-expression, valuing the subjects as creative and sensitive beings, causing them to take part as social actors and realize how to be constructive and important to their environment<sup>(3)</sup>.

Given the above, this study aims to understand the importance of theatrical activity as an occupational therapeutic tool in preventing the use of illicit drugs by adolescents placed in a community psychosocial project.

## METHODS

Having taken the object, the field and the goals into account, it was chosen the qualitative research nature<sup>(4)</sup>, the descriptive type<sup>(5)</sup>, under the critical and reflective perspective.

The field chosen was the community center of Dendê Community, located in the range of the VI Regional Executive Secretariat (*Secretaria Executiva Regional VI – SER VI*), in the city of Fortaleza-CE. The community of Dendê is marked by social marginalization. There are families living with the lack of basic resources, poor academic development and high unemployment, crime and addiction rate. It has population density of 14,000 inhabitants, surviving in small huts and stucco houses in the polluted banks of the Cocó river, which floods the region during the rainy season<sup>(6)</sup>.

Data collection occurred from March to May 2009. The study subjects consisted of ten 12-18 year-old adolescents of both gender, according to the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA), as implemented by law number 8.069 of July 13, 1999<sup>(7)</sup>. Exclusion criteria were minors who were not in that age group according to the ECA and/or were not linked to GESTTO group. In order to preserve the identity of adolescents linked to the research, it was used fictitious names.

Intending to get to know the experiences and perceptions concerning the prevention of use and abuse of illicit drugs, mediated by theatrical activities, it was used three fundamental procedures for the data collection: structured interview, simple observation of groups of theatrical activities and field diary.

The structured interview<sup>(5)</sup> had the following guiding questions: Do you know what illicit drugs are? What

damage can illicit drugs cause to a person's life? Why do adolescents seek illicit drugs? How is your family and social dynamics? Why do adolescents sell illicit drugs? How did you meet GESTTO? What did you think of taking part of in the group GESTTO? What is your perception of illicit drugs after binding to GESTTO? How can you be a multiplier agent in the prevention of illicit drugs use in your community? What has changed in your life after binding to theatrical activities?

The application of simple observation protocol<sup>(8)</sup>, created by the authors of the research, aimed to observe the integration of adolescents in the group, their perception of the problem of drugs and how the theatrical activity could mobilize them to be multiplier agents in the community.

It was used the field diary<sup>(5)</sup> on the purpose of registering the researcher's feelings and information obtained outside formal instruments. There was the need to make a chronological record of the activities, being also required a binder to collect the notes, which include subjects and occupational therapist.

To analyze the collected material, it was used Orlandi's<sup>(9)</sup> discourse analysis technique. This study also relies on occupational therapy<sup>(10)</sup> and anthropology<sup>(11)</sup> theorists.

After reading and rereading the material collected through interviews, observations and field journal, two major themes emerged: 1) perception of adolescents about the use of illicit drugs; and 2) perception of adolescents about the use of theatrical activity as a preventive strategy against illicit drugs use in the community.

This research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Fortaleza (*Universidade de Fortaleza – UNIFOR*), under the opinion number 082/2009 and CAAE 0013.0.037.000-09 governed by Resolution 196/96 of the Ministry of Health<sup>(12)</sup>. It was later taken permission from adolescents' parents or guardians, by the aid of signing the Free Informed Consent Form.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Perception of adolescents about the use of illicit drugs

It is perceived that youth living in underserved communities are considered at-risk adolescents. It happens due to the chaotic context of a society that keeps them orphaned of reference models, in a precarious socioeconomic and educational situation, family breakdown, increasing marginalization, among other risk factors, which cause them the harrowing feeling of helplessness. This way, they are led to the pursuit of pleasure and reverie, with the promise of happiness and fulfillment<sup>(13)</sup>. It is in this quest

that young people end up getting involved with some type of illicit drug.

*"Drugs are addictive to the user and can often lead to death or cause mental disorders, making the person not to have control of their character and make them aggressive or depressive. They must be banned from the social environment, because of the damage they can cause."* (Geana)

*"I think it's wrong to use drugs, because it brings so many evils. [The] family is the principal (...). There are many other ways of life beyond that one."* (Andy)

It is evident from the speeches of Geana and Andy that the awareness of the evils that the use of illicit drugs may cause was perceived by adolescents during the experiences, both in personal and social scope. Their speeches also emphasize the importance of prevention to expand the knowledge about the harms of psychoactive substances. Therefore, primary prevention measures in health care with individuals who do not make use of these psychoactive substances are important to reduce risks and damage caused to them and to the society.

The clinical and social complications caused by the consumption of such substances are well known and considered a problem of public health. The abuse and dependence on drugs threaten the political, economic and social values. Besides contributing to the growth of disbursement on medical treatment and hospitalization, it increases the rate of traffic accidents, urban violence and premature death<sup>(14)</sup>.

*"I think it's very bad. I wish there wasn't any kind of drug. I think taking drugs and some other stuff out, the world would be much better."* (Kátia)

*"I think the name says it all: 'drug'. I don't know why they exist, but I know that they only bring suffering to the people, especially family. The drugs serve only to destroy lives, mostly youngsters. It can be [of] any kind, but none brings happiness (...). I think that people use it through peer influence. Some can (sic) have problems and try to hide on drugs. I think they sell it because they can't find another way to survive and risk themselves selling it. It's this ... they buy and sell out for necessity and some get addicted and that's it, they only care about the drug and don't seek treatment."* (Yara)

*"I think it all sucks. That it has no future, it is empty. [...] People who have no culture or information and which are losing their lives and don't even notice."* (Rayane)

What is apparent from the speeches is an imprisonment in relation to illicit drug use and the realization that suffering is greater than the pleasure. It becomes evident when they emphasize the family loss and sorrow arising out of drugs use. The influence of the friends in the search for the drugs is prominent. The drugs fill an existential emptiness when it refers to the social, familiar and cultural vulnerabilities of the adolescents.

The current society is explicitly characterized by social inequalities, marked for contradictions of the production system and distribution of wealth and power. Thus, there is a high incidence of young people using drugs. They are seeking to escape from socioeconomic difficulties, existential contradictions and distress, unemployment, poverty, wars and declared and undeclared guerrillas, generational and class conflicts or fast cultural changes that represent a corporate model collapse<sup>(15)</sup>.

The situation of youth vulnerability must be considered in all its sources. The sooner the problem is identified, the greater are the possibilities to have preventive actions applied.

*"My opinion is that the drug does not take anybody anywhere, but [to] jail or cemetery."* (Yvan)

*"I think that rubbish is very bad because they cause many diseases and many problems for families and (...) friends."* (André)

*"For me, it is the lack of religion. For me, God is everything."* (Cristiano)

*"My opinion: These people do not know the word of God."* (Gabriel)

In these speeches, one can notice the feeling of hostility among young people to talk about the use of illicit drugs, making clear the awareness of the harm caused by its use. Religion is cited as support and protection. It plays an important type of social support, as it alleviates people's pain and mental suffering, reducing anxiety and depression<sup>(11)</sup>.

The experiences in family life itself, some of them related to affection, responsibility and setting limits may be important factors in teaching these young people how to relate to different types of drugs (licit and illicit), to which they can easily have access. There is no surefire prescription to prevent the use and/or abuse of drugs. What seems to exist are different modes of subjectivity that enable the establishment of legal relations in this context<sup>(16)</sup>.



### The theatrical activity in the prevention process to the use of illicit drugs in the community

The theatrical activity used with adolescents in social vulnerability aims to achieve principles of psychosocial rehabilitation. It develops levels of opportunities that young people have in order to help them as individuals who are able to progress and sustain themselves in the process of personal growth and maturation<sup>(14)</sup>. The theater activity is a work of art like any other. It is capable of producing, through the open roads of aesthetic practices, unequivocal effects of subjectification, in the broad sense of change and the operating regime of subjectivity<sup>(3)</sup>.

The art and body are essentially transdisciplinary fields, recognized and explored by philosophy, psychology, communications, education, anthropological studies and the occupational therapy. The art and body feature points of confluence between the need for human expression and the constant construction of language. They are vehicles and can become reference fields for the communication of each person<sup>(17)</sup>.

Assuming that theater brings to human beings the ability of self-expressing, of representing everyday situations, evaluating and perceiving themselves during their theatrical action, it can be noticed the importance of using this resource as a proposal to prevent the pursuit of illicit drugs and as a strategy to be used with the adolescent in cultural redemption. That may cause them to take control of their individual, social and cultural role in providing a space for the expression of conflicts and awareness of the issues of everyday life.

*"I've always been very dedicated to the art itself, and the theater has always captivated me. I've even attended other theatrical groups, but it was in GESTTO that I really found myself. The tune among the participants is wonderful, warm and knit. In GESTTO, I found several other talents in acting. Words can't describe GESTTO, to me. GESTTO, [is] my life! [...] [...] I learned what bad things drugs can bring us. I could experience what goes on, which feelings, because to experience my character; Ana Marcia, a junkie teenager; I had to make a laboratory on the coexistence of a drug addict. And that taught me a lot about this world (...). Theatre is life! And it can be used to express everything, very clearly. I do believe, yes, in this prevention coming from theater." (Geana)*

Geana's speech expresses her satisfaction in participating in the theater group GESTTO, where she notices during her theatrical experiences, the expression of feelings, a sense of spontaneity, the pleasure of being engaged in a group tied to the community, the reception, the support and creation of a new path to follow, filling the existential vacuum often

experienced by teenagers. It remains clear the benefits from the use of theatrical activity as a therapeutic resource and as the possibility of new learning and educational activities. The theatrical activity gives place to a new discourse and new images, intermediating a meeting with the new, and allowing the construction of a project of a different life.

*"For life, the drugs do not bring anything good. And with lectures, theaters and conversations, there is how to make people leave this life. [...] I can even pass to people who use it what I've learned (...). Wow! Even my way of thinking on drugs has changed. For everything there's a solution, though people can (sic) be there saying there's no way and so. But there is a way." (Andy)*

*"I've learned, at first, that the person in this life has to have the will power and then look for a support group to get out of this 'disease' and rejoin the world (...). Not having prejudice against these people was what I learned (...). I think my opinions have changed a lot. I thought people were using drugs just for fun, and now I see that this is not like that (...). I think it's amazing because using the theater is a form of [...] feeling they can change their reality and open new doors for their future." (Kátia)*

Art enables man to understand reality and help not only to tolerate it, but also to transform it, making it more acknowledgeable for mankind<sup>(18)</sup>. The creative act on the scene leads adolescents to discover and overcome barriers themselves increasingly expanding self-knowledge and knowledge of the world<sup>(18)</sup>.

What is noticeable is that the theater can be a means of transforming the subject, since adolescents perceived the problem of addiction from another point of view, without prejudice or stigma - not as an escape from reality, but as a disease. Furthermore, they have perceived themselves as agents of this reality by staging various situations. In this context, the theater becomes a facilitator for the inclusion of adolescents in new environments. It provides the construction and reconstruction of external reality. It stimulates creativity and expressiveness, and it allows family and social relations spaces, previously lived in a chaotic and unstructured way, to be filled with activities that enable the expression and reflection.

The art and body are creative, vital and fundamental forces for people who need to find other means of communication, i.e. who cannot express themselves in other ways. Art allows the expression of feelings in all aspects of life<sup>(16)</sup>.

*"I've learned that drugs are very bad for the people who use them and for the family. [...] It's very good for me and*

*for all because the GESTTO, it warns against the use of drugs. [...] Paying attention to which was said allows (...) us to move away from drugs.” (André)*

*“In GESTTO theater, I’ve learned that junkie life is very bad. [Junkies] are criticized, steal, murder to support their addiction. [...] I pass to other people what I’ve learned. [...] What changed was that I realized I do not need drugs when I’m in (sic) bad times.” (Gabriel)*

What is noticeable in the speeches is that the group also functions as a sharing and supporting space for these adolescents. It is evident that the GESTTO enabled new experiences and apprenticeship regarding the use and abuse of illicit drugs. Youngsters describe the group as a relaxed and welcoming space where “they do not feel alone”. This feeling emphasizes the significance of the group for them, who consider themselves a “GESTTO family”.

Through theater, one can express feelings and regain lost values, because it favors the creation of linkages to encourage adolescents to think critically about their conditions, since they feel welcome in the group<sup>(17)</sup>.

During the theatrical activities, significant elements, such as the inclusion of adolescents in a new environment of expressiveness and understanding were evident, making them multiplier agents in the community in which they live, framed for testing new roles and a new sociability. The speech comes out of the stereotype for a flexible wealth of meanings. Exchanges start to occur as mutual growth, and not as a business between things. The responsibilities of adulthood begin to emerge with concrete possibilities range from strategies that foster better organization of everyday life and family life.

After the theatrical activities, it was performed some debates and experiences that provided the adolescents a clarification of the harm that drugs cause. As they enacted, they began to question and reflect on the use of illicit drugs and the social and family conflicts faced by adolescents. Through the reports of the subjects during the group process, it has become possible to know a bit of life experiences, difficulties, fears and strengths.

The recreational activities and workshops dealing with creativity facilitate working with the body and the recreation of its forms of expression, as well as giving the individuals the ability to reflect on life in its essence and their human relations<sup>(16)</sup>.

Therefore, it is necessary to encourage the creation of public, free and quality therapeutic areas for young people in social vulnerability. To provide them opportunities to experience meaningful activities, family assistance and investing in the training of human resources, an interdisciplinary approach to the treatment of children

and adolescents addicted to illicit drugs. Private initiative participation can be facilitated in the financing of therapeutic projects by opening job opportunities without prejudice.

## CONCLUSION

The results show that the theatrical activities encouraged changes in behavior and attitudes of participants as well as the ability to perceive themselves as social actors and reflect on issues related to the prevention of illicit drugs use. They have also provided possible productions of some visibility, which when deployed as an object of reflection, may constitute an element of construction, articulation and transformation of everyday life

The therapeutic action should be part of a broader context, from prevention to rehabilitation in a clinical and efficient management in combat, control and treatment of psychoactive substances.

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