

Charms of Child and Youth-Services: work of the legal psychology sector of the public defender's office of Alagoas

SILVA, Jociele Vieira da ⁽¹⁾; LÚCIO, Livia Maria Rodrigues ⁽²⁾; SILVA, Ingridy Lara Araújo ⁽³⁾; SILVA, Roberta Cavalcante da ⁽⁴⁾; OLIVEIRA, Yasmin Fortaleza de ⁽⁵⁾; MAGALHÃES, Caroline Cavalcanti Padilha ⁽⁶⁾; SIMIÃO, Fernanda Cristina Nunes ⁽⁷⁾; BARBOSA, Lidianne dos Santos ⁽⁸⁾

- ⁽¹⁾  0009-0001-6289-3524; Universidade Federal de Alagoas, Discente de Psicologia, Estagiária - extensionista do Núcleo de Psicologia Jurídica da UFAL, Pesquisadora, Brasil. **Corresponding author Email: jociele.silva@arapiraca.ufal.br.**
- ⁽²⁾  0009-0006-9806-1523; Universidade Federal de Alagoas, Discente de Psicologia, Estagiária - extensionista do Núcleo de Psicologia Jurídica da UFAL, Pesquisadora, Brasil. livia.lucio@arapiraca.ufal.br
- ⁽³⁾  0000-0003-2441-7014; Universidade Federal de Alagoas, discente de Psicologia, pesquisadora voluntária do Ciclo Pibic 2024-2025 sobre Psicologia Escolar e Educacional, integrante do Núcleo de Psicologia Jurídica da UFAL, Brasil. ingrydylara@gmail.com
- ⁽⁴⁾  0009-0003-9498-381X; Defensoria Pública Estadual de Alagoas, Psicóloga Jurídica, pesquisador/a, Brasil. rober-ta.cavalcante10@gmail.com
- ⁽⁵⁾  0009-0009-2828-6219; Universidade Federal de Alagoas, Discente e Estagiária, pesquisadora, Brasil. fortalezayas-min030@gmail.com
- ⁽⁶⁾  0009-0008-2447-3407; Universidade Federal de Alagoas, docente de Psicologia, Co-coordenadora do Núcleo de Psicologia Jurídica da UFAL, Brasil. carolpadilha@palmeira.ufal.br
- ⁽⁷⁾  0009-0007-3395-5347; Universidade Federal de Alagoas, docente de Psicologia, Co-coordenadora do Núcleo de Psicologia Jurídica da UFAL, Brasil. fernanda@palmeira.ufal.br
- ⁽⁸⁾  0000-0003-1244-0719; Universidade Federal de Alagoas, docente de Psicologia, Co-coordenadora do Núcleo de Psicologia Jurídica da UFAL, Brasil. lidiane.barbosa@palmeira.ufal.br

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ABSTRACT

This work addresses the practice of child and adolescent care provided by the Psychology sector of the Public Defender's Office of the State of Alagoas (DPE/AL). At the interface of Psychology and Law, the sector aims to demonstrate the importance of welcoming this population, considering the sensitivity and care involved. The service assists children of separated parents, children in situations of social, economic, and, in the vast majority of cases, emotional vulnerability, offering a welcoming and playful space, acting to guarantee rights foreseen in the ECA (Statute of the Child and Adolescent), especially those related to socio-emotional development and health. In this sense, through a qualitative-quantitative documentary research, the aim was to show the relevance of the care provided to this population in the legal context, based on data collected from the services provided by the sector between September 2021 and April 2025. A contribution to the protection and promotion of rights.

RESUMO

Este trabalho versa sobre a prática do atendimento infantojuvenil realizado pelo setor de Psicologia da Defensoria Pública Estadual de Alagoas (DPE/AL). Na interface Psicologia e Direito, o setor visa apresentar a importância do acolhimento a este público, considerando a sensibilidade e o cuidado implicados. O serviço atende filhos de pais separados, crianças em vulnerabilidade social, econômica e, na grande maioria dos casos, afetiva, ofertando um espaço de acolhimento e ludicidade, atuando na garantia de direitos previstos no ECA (Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente), especialmente os de desenvolvimento socioemocional e saúde. Neste sentido, através de uma pesquisa documental de caráter quali-quantitativo, buscou-se mostrar a relevância do atendimento prestado a este público no contexto jurídico, com base nos dados coletados nos atendimentos realizados pelo setor no período de setembro de 2021 a abril de 2025. Uma contribuição para a proteção e promoção de direitos.

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Introduction

The concept of childhood as we currently understand it began to outline itself in the 13th century, but it was only between the 16th and 17th centuries that this phase came to be gradually recognized as a distinct stage of human development. Currently, it is understood that, from a psychological perspective, childhood is understood as a critical period for the formation of subjectivity, identity, and the individual's emotional and cognitive structures (Aries, 1981). In this sense, the contemporary perspective recognizes the child not merely as a being in development, but as an active subject of rights, emotions, and meanings, who requires care, protection, and, above all, qualified listening, as pointed out by the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA), from 1990.

Listening to a child, therefore, goes beyond simple attention to their words: it implies considering their symbolic, affective, and behavioral expressions within the context in which they are inserted. This listening must be sensitive to the specificities of child development and to the unique experiences lived by each child. Among the various spaces that foster this attentive and welcoming listening, psychotherapy occupies a prominent place, functioning as a privileged field to access children's experiences and promote comprehensive care, respecting the timing, narratives, and complexity of the child's inner world (Haubert & Vieira, 2014; Telles, 2014).

Psychotherapy, in the context of child psychology, is understood as a form of clinical intervention dedicated to caring for the child's psychic suffering, utilizing resources that are essentially psychological and adapted to their modes of expression. More than just eliminating symptoms, child psychotherapy seeks to understand the child in their totality—their emotions, bonds, behaviors, and ways of interacting with the world. It is a space for sensitive listening in which the therapist focuses on understanding the child within their family, school, and social context, recognizing them as a developing subject and holder of their own language, often expressed through play, drawing, and imagination (Ayres & Barreira, 2014). Thus, child psychotherapy configures itself as an important instrument of psychological care, offering a space for welcoming, symbolization, and development, which favors not only the reduction of symptoms but also the strengthening of the child's mental and emotional health.

This study stems from the context of an extension and internship practice that has been taking place through the Legal Psychology Nucleus (NPJ), founded by the Federal University

of Alagoas, Arapiraca Campus, Educational Unit of Palmeira dos Índios, by professors and students of the Psychology program. The NPJ is connected to the Legal Psychology Sector located at the Public Defender's Office of the State of Alagoas (DPE/AL) in the municipality of Arapiraca, and aims to ensure attention and care to the clients who seek this institution through listening shifts, psychological counseling, and participation in interdisciplinary interventions, enabling the mitigation of psychic suffering in these individuals, who arrive with difficulty coping with what brought them to the service. In this sense, qualified listening is offered to reduce anxieties and provide clarifications, helping to broaden their strategies for coping with their issues at the Public Defender's Office.

Serving all audiences of the institution, the sector carries out actions of welcoming, counseling, and individual brief psychotherapy, in addition to assisting in conflict mediation cases. One branch of these services is the welcoming and psychotherapy for children and adolescents. From September 2018—the period when the sector was integrated into the institution—until April 2025—the period of construction of this study—197 consultations were conducted with children and adolescents aged 3 to 17. Among the main demands served, notable situations arise from parental divorce, alienating processes and parental abandonment, manifestations of emotional suffering such as self-destructive behaviors and other conducts that cause personal and/or social damage, and school issues related to neurodevelopmental and behavioral disorders, such as oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), anxiety disorder, hyperactivity disorder, attention deficit disorder, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In addition, demands related to family violence and sexual abuse are received.

Thus, this study aims to elucidate the performance of the Legal Psychology Sector of the Public Defender's Office of the State of Alagoas, specifically regarding the child and youth care it provides. Furthermore, it seeks to identify the specificities within this modality of care, understand the effects of playfulness in welcoming and child psychotherapy, and outline the main demands received.

To this end, the methodology used in this study is documentary research, which, by extracting information present in documents, allows for an in-depth study of the presented phenomena, as indicated by Lima Junior et al. (2021). Subsequently, as a qualitative-quantitative research, it sought to complementarily aggregate socio-legal service data and produce an analysis regarding the relationship of the collected information. For this purpose, a theoretical discussion on the subject was conducted based on a literature review of scientific articles, books, and data obtained through the services rendered by the Psychology Sector of the Public Defender's Office of the State of Alagoas (DPE/AL).

A World Apart: The Specificities of Child and Youth Care

Child psychological care is a delicate encounter between two worlds, at an intersection between the adult's world (the psychologist) and the child's. It is a complex, sensitive, and symbolic practice in which gestures, silence, and the way of playing carry meanings that go far beyond words. Primarily, when this care occurs in contexts of social and legal vulnerability, such as the services provided at the Public Defender's Office, the challenges intensify, and listening must become much more attentive, careful, and empathetic. Far from being a miniature adult, the child has their own genuine ways of feeling and expressing themselves—be it dreams or suffering. In their childlike way, they communicate what they experience with their body, eyes, silence, and especially through play, which most of the time conveys what words cannot yet reach.

For Winnicott (1975), it is in play that the child finds their truest form of communication. In this sense, their pain appears hidden in seemingly innocent drawings, in the stories they invent, or in the characters they choose to represent their emotions, symbolically expressing their affections, fears, desires, and even the most difficult traumas to name. Following this logic, establishing a bond with a child in a therapeutic process is a path that requires patience, time, sensitivity, and, above all, the ability to suspend adult rationality in understanding the world. Therefore, it is up to the psychologist to have the sensitivity to see beyond the obvious, to welcome without rush, and to build, together with the child, a space of trust and care.

In light of the above, in legal practice, a child's psychic suffering is often intersected by multiple forms of violence, neglect, abandonment, abuse, and family disputes. These intersections directly reflect how they express themselves. Unlike adults, they do not arrive at the session with a rehearsed narrative of their suffering. In this sense, children and adolescents communicate through their bodies, looks, silences, and often through attitudes that might be misinterpreted by those not attentive to their emotional universe. Thus, they may demonstrate resistance, become irritated, avoid contact, or even persistently repeat what the psychologist says. Given this, not only technical preparation is required, but also sensitivity and qualified listening; one must be available to enter the child's universe.

In this process, it is essential that listening be carefully adapted to the child's developmental level. Expecting linear and verbalized communication from them, which is only present in adult maturity, means disregarding their developmental stage and emotional limits. Piaget and Inhelder (2003) show us that the way a child understands the world depends directly on

their emotional and social maturity. As such, young children organize their thoughts concretely, use play as their primary language, and, when emotionally disturbed, may express their distress through seemingly disorganized behaviors, such as aggressiveness, irritability, or withdrawal. In this vein, it is necessary for the professional to do more than interpret what the child says: they must be willing to temporarily set aside adult certainties to truly inhabit the logic of childhood.

Therefore, within the child therapeutic process, the use of playful materials, toys, drawings, and puppets is fundamental, acting as bridges between the child's world and the reality shared with the professional. These resources enable suffering to surface in a less threatening manner. Moreover, using these resources respects the child's psychic timing, as they often need several sessions just to explore, test, repeat, and gradually elaborate what they feel. Every choice of toy, story told, and even repetitive gesture carries meanings that the psychologist, with sensitive and sharp listening, must be able to comprehend. It is meticulous work in which the professional has the duty to position themselves as a facilitator of this process.

Monsters Under the Bed: Main Demands Attended

Regarding child and youth psychological care at the Public Defender's Office of the State of Alagoas (DPE/AL), demands arrive through two main pathways: spontaneous, in which the client along with their guardian directly seeks the service for follow-up; and through referrals from other sectors, such as the Health, Triage, and Reception Unit, when they observe the need for attentive and qualified listening.

In this scenario, based on information extracted from Service Records and Consent Forms signed by guardians, it was possible to list the service demands through the analysis of psychological records from the DPE/AL Psychology Nucleus. It began with the authors selecting descriptive categories: children, separated parents, child support, and custody. Establishing these categories led to the identification of 197 consultations with children and adolescents aged 3 to 17, conducted between September 2021 (the start of the sector's psychological work) and April 2025 (the time of the research), in which 131 cases were related to parental separation or derivative issues, and 66 were varied cases involving abuse, anxiety attacks, behavioral issues, and self-harm.

This survey aligns with the points made by Alvarenga Filho (2010), who highlights the importance of the Psychology professional in socio-legal service contexts grounding themselves in an ethical and political practice. This ensures they do not reproduce and legitimize violent processes, contributing instead to enhancing autonomy and building new worldviews, while constantly reflecting on how much our knowledge-power space can impact the life dynamics of the clients served.

Given the aforementioned demands, it is also essential for the psychologist treating the child and youth population to utilize more specific techniques to understand their worldview. Thus, listening is mediated not only by verbal communication but also through playfulness, drawing, painting, and games. The goal is to provide care grounded in the guidelines of the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA) and the promotion of well-being for this age group, strengthening their agency and their relationships with themselves and others (Vicentin, 2016).

Indeed, psychological care for children and adolescents in the legal context represents a space for promoting listening and autonomy regarding the demands brought by this audience, who possess their own contexts, histories, and convictions. Playfulness, in this sense, emerges as a tool for coping with and overcoming distress, ultimately making it possible to remove the "monsters" from under the bed.

The Playful Side of Psychology: From Scribbles to Psychological

Instruments

The child universe is essentially understood through the symbolic; children speak through their bodies, gestures, and, above all, through play. Unlike adults, whose verbal language is the main form of expression, a child's mode of expression is more sensitive and adapted to playfulness and the world of fantasy. Thus, within the context of child care provided by the Psychology Sector of the Public Defender's Office of the State of Alagoas (DPE/AL), the instruments used must respect this child language—not merely within an assessment context, but as a strategy for facilitating and strengthening bonds and welcoming these children.

Among the most frequently used resources are projective tests, which aim to access contents of the child's personality through various stimuli, such as drawings, stories, or ink-blots. According to Anzieu (1978), when an individual undergoes a projective test, their responses align with their subjective, inner world, projecting fears, desires, conflicts, and aspects of their psychic structure that would not be perceptible without these instruments. In children, this projection occurs naturally and spontaneously through playing, drawing, or storytelling. These activities are viewed as playful, and when well conducted, can reveal essential elements present in the children's subjectivity.

In the DPE/AL Psychology Sector, certain projective tests are widely used to understand emotional, familial, and identity aspects of children. One of them is the **House-Tree-Person (HTP)** test, developed by John N. Buck in 1948 (with its most recent edition in 2024),

involving three drawings: a house, a tree, and a person. Each element represents distinct aspects of the child's personality: the house relates to emotional security and family experiences; the tree relates to vitality and emotional and life development; and the human figure represents self-image and identity traits. A post-drawing interview is conducted with the client, allowing an integrative reading of the drawings combined with the child's life history (Retondo, 2000).

Another test, systematized by Louis Corman (2003), the **Family Drawing Test**, offers a broader, symbolic reading of the child's family and affective bonds. The interviewer asks the child to draw a family in any way they prefer, allowing the professional to observe how the child organizes the figures—who appears, who is missing, the distance between members, and the characteristics portrayed. Afterward, the child is asked to describe the drawing; their statements about the characters and relationships often prove even more revealing than the drawing itself.

The **Draw-A-Person (DAP)** test, developed by Machover (1949), allows the administrator to observe how the child constructs images of themselves, the world, and others. All drawing details are noted, including sequence, omitted details, execution time, and comments made by the client during the administration. These details provide valuable data for investigating emotional issues, self-esteem, insecurities, and identity conflicts.

In addition to these projective instruments, another thematic projective technique that is verbal-written is the resource titled "**Real vs. Ideal Father/Mother.**" The child is asked to describe how their parents currently are (characteristics, attitudes, etc.) and subsequently state or write how they would like them to be. This tool can reveal frustrations, unfulfilled desires, and idealizations, proving useful in cases involving custody conflicts, parental absence, or ambivalent feelings toward parents.

It is important to emphasize that clinical practice in the DPE/AL Psychology Sector values the spontaneity and creativity originating from the child's subjective world. Thus, free expression is encouraged, allowing children to use colored pencils, markers, or gouache paint. These unscripted moments allow the child to create at their own pace, often representing family scenes, favorite cartoon characters, or abstract forms.

This freedom of expression, combined with the choice of colors and themes, offers psychologists vital clues regarding the child's emotional states, latent thoughts, and symbolic contents. Furthermore, free drawing promotes emotional self-regulation and a sense of safety and control, as there are no fixed rules to follow (Liebmann, 2000; Silva, 2010).

Adapted playful resources serve as fundamental tools for accessing emotional content and strengthening the therapeutic bond. The "**Emotion Deck**," for instance, features cards illustrated with different affective expressions to help children recognize, name, and differen-

tiate daily emotions. Consequently, it fosters emotional vocabulary and affective self-regulation—especially in children who verbalize little or use emotional silence as a defense mechanism (Silva, 2010).

The **UNO** card game is another essential resource and a child favorite. Beyond being a popular game, in the clinical context it serves a primary function: reinforcing the psychotherapeutic bond. Playing together fosters an environment of trust, playfulness, and cooperation, breaking initial barriers and facilitating a safe connection between psychologist and child. Spontaneous remarks and significant behaviors emerge during play. As Cruz and Righetti (2009) state, the game acts as a symbolic bridge, enabling joint meaning-making and the expression of content that might not otherwise be verbalized.

Modeling clay is also widely used for non-verbal expression. By shaping characters and scenarios, children provide symbolic form to internal experiences that are difficult to name, which is crucial during early childhood when language mastery is incomplete (Levisky, 1997). Clay manipulation, color choices, and themes reveal aspects of psychic organization, fears, fantasies, and desires, allowing deeper interpretation of emotional signs (Papalia & Feldman, 2013).

Finally, the **Jenga** game is used to reinforce the affective bond and work symbolically on themes like balance, feelings, and challenges. Knocking over the tower generates spontaneous reactions and conversations, revealing frustration tolerance, emotional regulation strategies, and anxiety management—conditions frequently mobilized in children exposed to family conflicts.

Therefore, these projective tests and playful resources constitute a technical-affective repertoire serving care and dignity. They facilitate access to subjectivity, promote affective bonds, and ensure rights within legal contexts, transforming play, modeling, and drawing into clinical listening tools (Winnicott, 1975).

The Magical World: The Public Defender's Psychology Sector

Children and adolescents function differently from adults (Silveira, 2003). They are discovering the world, life, and themselves, meaning experiences can be complex to navigate. Doubts, shame, fears, and difficult emotions resemble a puzzle with many small pieces that takes time to assemble.

A relationship of safety and emotional connection between child and professional is crucial for successful care (Rodrigues & Mishima-Gomes, 2013). The DPE/AL Psychology Sector prioritizes care, warmth, and affection, recognizing that clients in legal contexts often arrive in states of psychological vulnerability.

Building a bond requires respecting the child's timing, pauses, and rhythm. This ensures the process is not seen as an obligation, making it easier to address difficult topics later (Rodrigues & Mishima-Gomes, 2013).

Essential care includes understanding the child's unique functioning to customize the service. Being present with them, respecting their process, and understanding their environment and relationships are vital, as these factors directly impact development and well-being (Meireles, 2013).

The sector utilizes drawing, play, stories, games, painting, music, dance, and characters to express feelings that are hard to verbalize (Ribeiro & Gomes, 2020). Extension interns, under professional supervision, observe behavioral signs, facial expressions, and interaction patterns. These observations provide valuable insights into the child's internal world to guide effective interventions (Melo & Miccione, 2023).

The service aims to act as a "magical chest"—a safe space where children and youth can store their "treasures" (experiences, fears, conflicts). Through empathetic listening, professionals help transform these challenges into emotional growth.

Final Considerations

Child and youth care performed by the DPE/AL Psychology Sector is an essential practice for promoting rights, especially for those in socio-psychological vulnerability. It demonstrates the vital interface between Psychology and Law in addressing subjective, family, and social dimensions.

Playful resources, psychological tests, and qualified listening transform the consultation room into a symbolic, "magical" world where play materials reveal stories, fears, and dreams that are welcomed and transformed.

In the face of complex demands (violence, neglect, abandonment), these spaces act as "magical portals" to the child's subjective world. The psychologist acts as a guardian—protecting inner strengths and supporting emotional development throughout their life journey.

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Data availability

The data underlying the research are reported in the article

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