

Factors Influencing the Mental Health of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas

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Abstract. The problem of left-behind children in rural areas is in existence for many years. Notably, their psychological well-being is the most concerned issue. Scholars previously devoted a great deal of efforts to exploring the causes of the psychological problems of rural left-behind children from school, family and personal aspects, and developed a series of views as a result. This paper intended to summarize and analyze the factors affecting the psychological health of these children from four parts, including family, school, individual and interaction. The aim was to provide guidance for improving the psychological health of rural left-behind children, promoting the well-beings of rural families and social stability in rural areas.

Keywords: Left-behind children in rural areas; mental health; influence factor

1. Introduction

Left-behind children in rural areas are minors under the age of 18 who have been left in their hometown for more than three months because both or one of their parents have gone out to work [1]. Stay-at-home children in rural areas become an unavoidable social problem [2]. They are subjected to enormous mental and physical stress as the traditional family model is broken, family roles are missing and responsibilities are shifted. As such, it is of great practical importance to pay attention to the development of this group. With the increasing number of left-behind children, it grows to be an important research issue to explore the development characteristics and mechanisms of this group. Many problems are prevalent among children who are left behind in rural areas, and the most concerning issue is their mental health [3].

When stay-at-home children grow up, it is difficult for them to form a relatively stable attachment relationship because they are separated from both or one of their parents. On the other hand, skip-generation raising often leads to the unmet emotional needs of children and the lack of necessary social support [1]. On top of that, parent-child communication is generally the primary model for communicating with others. However, since communication between left-behind children and their parents is intermittent, it is quite hard for them to build trust. Therefore, usually self-enclosed, they are not good at expressing themselves. More importantly, they are prone to projecting irrational notions into their relationships with others [4]. Studies showed that left-behind children had more psychological and behavioral problems than their peers [5]. For example, both externalizing problems including discipline and aggressive violence, and internalizing problems, such as loneliness, anxiety and depression [6] were fairly serious. If not curbed in time, left-behind children would be easy to deviate from their understanding and values, and some might even commit crimes.

The mental health study of left-behind children is not only a need for their growth, but also a need for family happiness and social harmony. According to the ecosystem theory, the mental health problems of stay-at-home children are not simply affected by the long-term migration of their parents; rather, it is influenced by the interaction of various factors, such as parents, guardians, schools, society, and left-behind children themselves.

2. Family

Ecosystem theory suggests that the family, as a micro-system, has the most direct impact on children's development in all aspects. Existing studies found that family factors affecting the mental

health of left-behind children mainly involved three categories: demographic variable characteristics of parents and guardians (parental education, type of guardian, etc.), migrant parents (whether both parents are migrant workers, length of time out to work, etc.), and family environment (parents' marital status, number of children, parent-child relationship, family atmosphere, etc.).

2.1 Demographic variable characteristics of parents and guardians

The characteristics of parents and guardians demographic variables can affect the level of mental health of left-behind children to some extent. Studies found [7] that the educational level of the fathers of left-behind children was effective in reducing the incidence of their psychological problems. This might be because these parents were more educated, more focused on psychological communication with their children. They have correspondingly more communication skills to help their children tackle the problems in a flexible manner. As a result, these children would be more likely to confide in and seek help from their parents, thus, maintaining a good level of mental health. A study by Lu et al [8] showed that left-behind children under grandparents or other guardians and left-behind children under self-guardianship had poorer mental health than those under single-parent guardianship. This meant that as far as the impact of mental health of left-behind children was concerned, there was no substitute for the role of parents. Grandparents or other guardians, for various reasons, were lack of concern to the children left behind in terms of their mental and emotional needs. It was precisely because they ignored the importance of these factors to children's development that they eventually caused some mental health problems of children.

2.2 Migrant parents

Both parents being migrantworkers, likewise, will have an effect on the mental health of children left behind. A study manifested that migrant parents were risk factors for the mental health of stay-at-home children [9]. In addition, both parents going out to work had a greater impact on the mental health of left-behind children than that of single parent, indicating that separation from parents had an important influence on the mental health of children left behind [8]. Nevertheless, certain factors could reduce the negative impact of migrant parents on the mental health of left-behind children. For example, if a kid's father had a fixed job and his place of work was close to home, it was conducive to reducing the incidence of psychological problems of left-behind children [7]. The study also showed that the longer the left-behind children stayed at home, that is, the longer their parents went out to work, the more serious their mental health would be [10]. This might be due to the fact that left-behind children were at the critical stage of physical and mental development, which was the period when they needed parents' care. But, as a matter of fact, stay-at-home children got more negative emotions as they were separated from their parents for a long time. No one gave them the emotional support they deserved, nor did anyone meet their various needs. This was supported by the study of Liu et al [11] that long-term parental absence (more than four months) could make a negative impact on the psychological health of children left behind.

2.3 Family environment

Family environment, as an important factor, also has a significant influence on the mental health of left-behind children. First, as parents are important members of the family and the main dependents of children, the stability of their marital status is extremely crucial for children. The mental health of left-behind children with abnormal parental marriages was significantly lower than that of left-behind children with stable parental marriages. Parents who were often argumentative, aggressive, and hostile provided models for children's interpersonal relationships, which might lead to left-behind children being more likely to perceive hostility in others during interpersonal interactions, develop a hostile attribution bias, and consequently have hostile attitudes toward those around them. Second, left-behind children with many siblings in the family had a lower tendency to

be lonely than those without any siblings or with only one sibling in the family. It is probably because an intact and good family structure was a protective factor for the mental health of left-behind children. When faced with difficulties, left-behind children with many siblings were able to support each other, and get protection from their siblings [6]. Furthermore, the amount of contact with parents also made a difference on the mental health of left-behind children. The fewer times they met with their parents, the more serious their learning anxiety, anxiety about others, loneliness tendency and terror symptoms would be. Some studies concluded that missing migrant parents produced the greatest impact on the mental health of left-behind children [8].

The above studies suggest that, compared with changing the inherent factors such as parents' education level and guardianship category, due care should be given to the left-behind children. Increased parent-child communication and enhanced attention to the mental health of left-behind children by their guardians is an effective way to improve their mental health.

3. School

Apart from family factors, school factors also have a profound influence on the mental health of left-behind children, including: classroom composition, teacher-student relationship, peer relationship, whether to live on campus, and sports activities.

3.1 Classroom composition

The proportion of students with different family backgrounds and characteristics in a class forms a stable classroom composition, which is the objective foreground for producing a differentiated class environment. Hou et al [12] explored whether the proportion of rural children in general or left-behind children in a class would have some effect on the emotional and psychological adjustment of left-behind children. The results demonstrated that the higher the percentage of rural children in general in a class, the lower the self-esteem of the stay-at-home children was. The average depression level of the students in a class was a significant predictor of depressive symptoms in the left-behind children. Stay-at-home children had roughly the same family background, life experiences, but their living standards were different from those of rural children in general. In a classroom composition with a higher percentage of rural children in general, left-behind children were more likely to experience discrimination and bullying, leading to an increased incidence of their mental health.

3.2 Teacher-student relationship

In less developed areas, parents of left-behind children are forced to go out to work for various reasons, including economic reasons. In addition, parents and guardians of left-behind children have a lower level of education and do not pay enough attention to the mental health of their children. Therefore, teachers play a guiding role in the course of left-behind children's growth. Research showed that teacher-student relationship was one of the important factors affecting the psychological health of left-behind children. As such, teachers needed to pay attention to the mental health of left-behind children all the time while imparting knowledge. What's more, teachers are needed to attend to their mood swings and identify their problems in time in ways to help left-behind children solve problems and improve their moods. Last but not least, teachers are needed to take the initiative to create a good teacher-student relationship atmosphere for the left-behind children to make up for their lack of care in family life.

3.3 Peer relationship

A study by Zhao et al [9] discovered that peer relationship was one of the important factors affecting the mental health of stay-at-home children. As they grew older, peer relationship became a key part of an individual's interpersonal relationship and played an increasingly important role in children's life. Especially for left-behind children, in an unfavorable environment of parental care,

peers became a vital source for them to meet social interactions, obtain support and sense of security. A study by Lu [13] found that peer acceptance positively predicted the psychological security of stay-at-home children. In a mutually acceptable and harmonious peer relationship, left-behind children managed to gain relationships and support through communication with peers with similar knowledge backgrounds, lifestyles, and hobbies, helping them relieve negative emotions such as inferiority complex and fear, and having a higher climate for mental safety. More importantly, such interpersonal support assisted left-behind children explore the outside world. Therefore, teachers needed to create a classroom atmosphere of mutual help and acceptance to help left-behind children gain positive experiences of peer interaction.

3.4 Whether to live on campus

Zhang et al. [7] discovered that left-behind children who lived on campus were more prone to psychological problems. This suggested that after staying at school, children left behind not only had less communication with their parents, but also had limited contact with their guardians. The perceived family support of stay-at-home children was significantly reduced, which was not conducive to their psychological development and character formation.

3.5 Sports activities

A study [14] indicated that sports activities made some degree of impact on children left behind in rural areas. Physical exercise was an effective way to improve physical health and address psychological issues. Exercise not only enhanced individual physical fitness and created positive emotions, but also leveled up psychological qualities such as willpower and self-control. At the same time, as physical exercise always took place in a certain social circumstance, it also helped left-behind children strengthen interpersonal communication and improve their social adaptation.

4. Own factors

The left-behind children's own factors also affected their mental health. For example, age, attitudes toward their migrant parents, psychological resilience, coping styles, and self-efficacy.

4.1 Age

Lu et al. [8] discovered that the mental health of left-behind high school students was significantly better than that of left-behind elementary and middle school students. First, left-behind elementary and middle school students, who were separated from either parents or single-parent for a long time, had difficulty forming stable attachment. Raising by grandparents often failed to meet the emotional needs of children. Parent-child communication was the original model of communication with others. As the communication between the left behind children and their parents were intermittent, it was difficult to build trust, and such distrust was easy to spread to others. In contrast, as they grew older, when interacting with their peers and teachers, left-behind children gradually acquired good interaction patterns and formed good interpersonal relationships, so their mental health levels were higher than those of in elementary and junior high school [15]. Second, compared with primary school and junior high school students, the cognition and emotion of left-behind high school students were further developed. As such, in their long-term independent life, left-children in high school accumulated more experience and acquired flexible response to environmental changes and problem-solving approaches. In turn, they could better handle their emotions, so their mental health level improved.

4.2 Attitudes toward migrant parents

Incomplete family structure does not necessarily lead to left-behind children's mental health problems. The key lies in the left-behind children's attitude and understanding of their families and migrant parents. A study demonstrated that the mental health of left-behind children who supported

their parents to go out to work was significantly better than that of left-behind children with "indifferent" or "unsupportive" attitudes [8]. This meant that when left-behind children understood and supported their parents to go out to work, they would not have negative emotions such as resistance and complaints. In other words, if left-behind children managed to face the separation with their migrant parents appropriately and adapt to the environmental changes positively, then the chance of mental health problems would decrease.

4.3 Psychological resilience

It was found that psychological resilience and its five dimensions of goal focus, emotional control, positive cognition, family support, and interpersonal assistance all had a positive effect on psychological well-being. This indicated that the higher the degree of psychological resilience and its dimensions, the higher the level of psychological well-being. Mental toughness could help left-behind children better cope with the setbacks in life. Therefore, attention should be paid to the cultivation of mental toughness of left-behind children to promote their physical and mental development [15].

4.4 Coping styles

When faced with the same stress, why some individuals developed well while others developed poorly. This might be related to the coping styles adopted by individuals, as they determined the approaches or strategies to cope with internal and external environments as well as emotional distress. The way left-behind children responded to their migrant parents and the various negative life events that followed would affect their mental health. Positive coping styles could play a protective role in the mental health of left-behind children, while negative coping styles might further enhance the negative effects of negative life events on their mental health. Hu et al [16] demonstrated that positive coping styles of left-behind children significantly and positively predicted their mental health. This suggested that "left behind" as a risk factor might lead to a decrease in the mental health of stay-at-home children, but "left behind" did not necessarily make a direct impact on the mental health of children left behind. Coping was one of the protective factors that moderate the negative effects of "left behind" on mental health.

4.5 Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's perception or belief that he/she manages to take adaptive actions when facing challenges in the environment [17]. Left-behind children with good self-efficacy have a good shape of mental health [3], indicating that self-efficacy is a protective factor for the mental health of stay-at-home children. When left-behind children realize that they are capable of solving a difficulty, i.e., when they have high self-efficacy, they are able to mobilize various resources and try their best to address the problems, thus maintaining a good state of mind. In contrast, when left-behind children have low self-efficacy, they do not see the possibility of solving problems and may overestimate the difficulty of solving them. Coupled with the fact that they do not have the help of their parents, they will develop a series of psychological problems. As such, in the education of left-behind children, their mental health can be improved by increasing their general self-efficacy.

5. Reciprocal effect

Undoubtedly, the mental health of rural left-behind children is the product of the reciprocal effect of multiple factors, which work together with great complexity. A study found that personality traits (internal and external dispositions, neuroticism and psychopathy) could directly predict the mental health of left-behind children; more importantly, the psychological health of left-behind children could be indirectly influenced through self-efficacy [18]. At the same time, self-efficacy played a mediating role in the prediction of mental health of left-behind children in

terms of coping styles. The mental health of stay-at-home children was influenced by both personality traits and social support, i.e., the mental health of these children was negatively influenced by personality traits (neuroticism and psychosis), while positively influenced by social support [3]. Therefore, it is quite difficult to explore the reciprocal effects of various factors on the mental health of left-behind children. However, in exploring effective ways to solve the mental health problems of left-behind children, we'd better seek to maximize its own factors. Then, with the support of families and the resources of school education, a multidimensional development pattern is established to help improve the mental health of rural left-behind children.

6. Conclusion

All in all, left-behind children in rural areas is a major social problem that needs to be solved in rural China. And their mental health problem is one of the most concerned issues. The factors affecting the mental health of left-behind children originate from many aspects such as family, school, and themselves. Future research can be deepened on this basis to provide theoretical basis and empirical support for the mental health education of left-behind children.

Declarations

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