

Research on the Mental Health Problems of Left-Behind Children in Rural China

Ziwei Chen^{1, *, †}, Ziyang Hu^{2, *, †}, Qingyi Zheng^{3, *, †}

¹Lanzhou University of Finance and Economics No.4, Weile Avenue, Heping Town, Yuzhong County, Lanzhou City, Gansu Province, China

²Xinhua College of Sun Yat-Sen University No.7 Yanjiangxiyi Road, Machong Town, Dongguan City, Guangdong Province, P.R. China

³Shanghai Lixin University of Accounting and Finance 995 Shangchuan Road, Shanghai China

*Corresponding author. Email: guanghua.ren@gecademy.cn

†These authors contributed equally.

ABSTRACT

With the development of Chinese economy and affected by the urban and rural household, urban and rural household registration system as well as various national policies, an increasing number of migrant workers pour into cities in recent years. Thus, there is a noticeable surge in the group of left-behind children, which is captivated by the officials and society. The research makes an in-depth study on the formation factors, personality problems and manifestations of left-behind children from the three aspects of home, school and country, and finally puts forward feasible and effective solutions in the hope of creating a better growing environment for left-behind children.

Keywords: *Left-behind Children; Psychological Problems, Formation Factors; Solutions*

1. INTRODUCTION

In February 2016, the State Council of China issued the "Opinions on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas", which indicates that left-behind children refer to minors under the age of 16 whose parents both go out to work or one of whose parents is out to work and the other is incapable of guardianship. It also puts forward that the care and protection of left-behind children in rural areas should be strengthened, for it is the joint responsibility of the family and the whole society [1].

In 2021, China's urban and rural economic development is still uneven, so many rural migrant workers go into the towns to find jobs, which is one of the major reasons for the large number of left-behind children. Even at a time when the rural "education trend" is rising and children who get educated gradually becoming younger, the isolated household registration system between urban and rural areas and the influence of various national policies have led to many obstacles, such as difficulties in enrolling to cities' schools (so they have to take the college entrance examination in their places of origin). In addition, rural families will also

face the problems of high entrance fees to urban areas, which is unaffordable. This is also a serious problem that the choice of teaching materials in locals differs from other areas, which causes a problem for students about disconnecting the contents of education. Due to various difficulties and financial problems, the majority of rural children remain in their places of origin for education and then become left-behind children. According to the National Research Report on the Status of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas released by the All-China Women's Federation, there are about 58 million left-behind children in rural areas in China, of whom more than 30 million are left-behind children during the compulsory education period. In some labor-exporting provinces, left-behind children account for 18-22% of the total number of local children. In addition, and survey of two rural areas, Fan County, Henan Province and neighboring Shandong Province, shows that the proportion of left-behind children among local children is over 50%, with the number of 61.2% and 38.4% respectively [2].

The "left-behind" environment has a psychological impact on children that cannot be ignored. The parents of left-behind children in rural areas are away from home for a long time and lack effective communication

with their children, which leads to the lack of a good psychological growth environment for children and increasingly prominent mental health problems. Left-behind children often resist learning or lack of self-control. As for the character problems of left-behind children, left-behind girls are prone to inferiority and abandonment, and left-behind boys are prone to treason and crime [3]. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the psychological problems of left-behind children. This study will analyze the influence of school, family and society on the psychological development of left-behind children from the perspective of the factors that affect their psychological problems. At the same time, this study will elaborate on the current psychological problems of rural left-behind children, which can be divided into three categories: interpersonal problems, learning problems and personality problems. Among them, interpersonal communication problems are divided into three aspects: communication with parents, communication with relatives and communication with peers. Finally, this study puts forward targeted countermeasures according to the problems, which can help left-behind children gradually form correct values and sound personalities in education.

2. INFLUENCING FACTORS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS OF LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN

2.1. School Factors

Except for being with foster families, left-behind children in rural areas spend more time with teachers and classmates in school, however, with poorer educational understanding and weak teaching resources, current rural schools even do not have a mental health education system. Therefore, the subject structure gradually biased towards exam-taking subjects such as Chinese, English, mathematics. Even though in some schools that offer psychology courses, teachers usually teach multiple subjects at the same time, which means they are not experts in psychology. They just read the teaching materials and have no actual influence on the students' mental health. As a result, students feel that there is no need to master psychological knowledge, psychological problems are not worthy of attention, and the efficiency of mental health education is greatly reduced [4].

Moreover, boarding school is more conducive to the development of students' mental health, while due to insufficient facilities and other necessary conditions, most rural boarding schools cannot provide dormitory. In addition, neither the school nor the parents have the awareness of "home-school co-education". Without home visits in person and daily communication with their parents, mental health of children has been affected

in both objective and subjective ways [5].

2.2. Family Factors

First, rural parents or guardians of children are mostly focused on economic sources rather than how to optimize children's education because parents or other guardians are generally at a low level of education. The research of Hu and Li shows that the percentage of guardians who are illiterate or semi-literate is 19.89% [6]. Among the guardians, those under the age of 40 and over 60 account for less than 30% and 38.34% respectively. Older guardians have more time to take care of their children, but most of them take providing basic accommodation as fundamental tasks. Therefore, they pay little attention to the child's psychological problems, as long as the children's study.

The teaching methods of the guardians may affect the development of children's psychology. In his theory of cognitive development, Lev Vygotsky, a psychologist in the former Soviet Union, pointed out that a variety of social factors have an extremely important influence on the development of children's cognitive abilities, especially the family environment and atmosphere created by the parents who provide guidance, including their parents' language, behaviors, educational ideas, lifestyle and learning habits, which play a direct or indirect role in their life [7]. In addition, Liu classified the parenting methods as: rejection, disagreement, doting, expectant, severe, contradictory [8]. The guardians of left-behind children have lack of passion in creating a good atmosphere in their home. Meanwhile, it's common that they always adopt the way of behavioral control to supervise the children, which has a seriously negative impact on children's growth [8]. According to the above two theories, the inappropriate way of discipline of children by left-behind child guardians can cause problems in character, interpersonal communication and learning.

2.3. National and Social Factors

The development of spiritual civilization construction in rural areas is relatively slow, and there is a lack of healthy and positive collective activities. Social education for left-behind children is in vain [9]. At the same time, the sparse population of rural areas has increased the difficulty of management and public security, such as the existence of underground casinos, black Internet cafes, game hall and other entertainment venues [10]. This social environment is very unfavorable to the mental health development of left-behind children.

In addition, according to the research of Hu and Li, due to the restrictions of household registration system, housing system and entrance system of migrant population, the objective factors that cause rural

children to stay behind are relatively large. Among them, 38.71% of the respondents said that "the fees charged by the construction site schools are too expensive". At the same time, "the construction site schools do not accept children of migrant workers" also had some influence. These factors lead to a result that large number of left-behind children cannot grow up in a better social environment, indicating that national policies are one of the indirect reasons for the psychological problems of left-behind children [6].

3. PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS OF LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN AND THE FORMS OF MANIFESTATION

3.1. Personality problems

3.1.1. Rebel mentality.

The rebellious mentality of left-behind children of the same age in rural areas is much more serious than that of non-left-behind children. They are very alert and even resist to the outside world [11]. Without thinking calmly about the criticisms or suggestions of their families and teachers, they consider that others have offended themselves, so they take such self-protection measures. In addition, most children are raised by intergenerational upbringing. The lack of guardian education leads to the early bad behaviors of left-behind children, including truancy, vandalism and bullying, which have not been corrected in time [12].

3.1.2. Dereism.

Most left-behind children have communication barriers with their guardians. Their parents are not around and the lack of parent's care and greetings makes some children depressed and feel inferior [11]. At the same time, children are in a period of psychological sensitivity. When the needs of listening to the inner words cannot be satisfied, they will hide a lot of ideas in their minds and close themselves up over time [13].

3.2. Interpersonal problems

According to the results of many studies, left-behind children in rural areas of China often show two extreme phenomena in communication. One is anxiety and uncomfortableness, such as being cautious, nervous, cringing when communicating with others, leading to speechlessness or fear of social interaction [14]. The other is extreme rebellion. Left-behind children often argued with teachers and classmates, and refused to be disciplined by adults such as teachers and parents, and eventually even went astray.

3.2.1. Problems with peers.

Left-behind children show a lack of care and sense of security in their interactions with their peers. They obsess with their own world and do not trust others easily. On campus, they have weak collective ideas, often violate school rules and regulations, have no collective perception, and often appear to be alone, they do not interact with teachers and classmates at all or have a strong rebellious mentality, and they tend to conflict with classmates. Driven by rebellious psychology, left-behind children in rural areas will be affected by bad social habits, which make them unable to distinguish between right and wrong, so that there will be a certain deviation in personal behavior [4].

3.2.2. Problems with parents and relatives.

Left-behind children seldom communicate with their parents, which makes the mental health problems more serious [14]. Moreover, lots of left-behind children are left at homes with relatives. In addition to keeping their children full and warm, they seldom take the children's mental health into account. Negative factors accumulate continuously, and they become indifferent and gradually deviate from the track of healthy growth [15].

3.2.3. Problems of getting alone with teachers.

For the education of left-behind children, family education and school education should help each other to form a complete children's education system, but the absence of parents of left-behind children has greatly increased the teacher's educational responsibility. Left-behind children who have academic performance often experience three basic stages: strict discipline, hard-talking, and laissez-faire. In the first two stages, the left-behind children will reject the teacher's discipline subconsciously. While in the third stage, teachers will give up to discipline those students. Therefore, left-behind children with poor grades will have a conflict with their teachers. At the same time, teachers will have feelings of irritability and boredom. Once this kind of psychology is formed, the relationship between left-behind children and teachers will become more tense [16].

3.3. Learning Problems

3.3.1. Poor learning habits.

Due to the lack of necessary supervision, left-behind children usually have low learning initiative, and temporary guardians pay little attention to their academic performance [17]. Many left-behind children are young, and their outlook on life, world outlook and values are still in the shaping stage, and they are at the immature age. Without strong supervision, their learning

habits will be poor and their interest in learning will not be strong.

3.3.2. Low learning ability.

The growth of children is a stage in which parents need to accompany and guide them. The lack of parental guidance and encouragement reduces the learning confidence of left-behind children, and long-term separation from their parents and lack of communication makes them unable to release their feelings, which leads to self-isolation and inferiority easily. Due to loneliness, left-behind children tend to have difficulty in concentrating in class [17].

3.3.3. Psychological problems may lead to dropout.

Parents of left-behind children are more likely to have "compensation thoughts" and tend to make up for their failure to realize their dreams by setting high standards and strict requirements for their children [18]. Left-behind children themselves are more likely to be sensitive, self-abased or irritable, which is more likely to lead to increased learning pressure, weariness and truancy, grades decline, and even dropout [1].

4. COUNTERMEASURES FOR THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS OF LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN

4.1. School education

4.1.1. Hire professional psychology teachers to carry out targeted psychological education.

Teachers should use various psychological guidance methods to make it adapt to different characteristics. As for students who have already experienced psychological problems, avoid being rough and impatient, teach students how to solve problems according to the guidance of psychologist [5].

4.1.2. Conditions for psychological learning should be created.

Compared with teaching subjects such as Chinese, mathematics, English, etc., teachers should create effective psychological learning conditions for rural left-behind children as much as possible, such as carrying out a variety of colorful after-school activities to promote the overall development of students and prevent left-behind children from being affected by the negative effects from the society reasonably [15].

4.1.3. Establish files on the psychology condition for students and improve a scientific psychological education system.

Improving the files of left-behind children in rural areas is the core of accurately grasping the mental health of left-behind children. Therefore, schools need to introduce new technology to record the basic situation of children through the establishment of network files, and replenish the psychological and learning condition in daily teaching, which helps to observe the development of children's mental health [14].

4.2. Home education

4.2.1. Take care of your children and entrust them to trusted relatives.

According to the expert investigation, most guardians have a low level of education and can only provide relatively complete accommodation. To better solve the psychological problems of left-behind children, we should pay attention to the choice of guardians, including facing children with correct method, giving timely behavioral guidance when necessary, and actively communicating with children at regular times to break the barrier of intergenerational education [19].

4.2.2. Use Social Media To Strengthen Communication With Children As Well As Encouraged Education.

According to the survey of scholars, in the families of left-behind children, parents give up or are unwilling to shoulder the custody for their children for the reason of working outside [20]. This casts a shadow over children who lack family care. Compensation for children should not only focus on material aspects, but also on strengthening the maintenance and communication of family ties [21]. Internet and other ways can increase communication and educational opportunities between parents and children, which is conducive to the psychological development of left-behind children.

4.2.3. Get In Touch With The Temporary Guardian And The School Regularly To Find Out The Children's Recent Situation.

Parents, teachers and guardians regularly take the initiative to inquire about their children's learning at home and school by SMS or telephone. And parents can invite teachers to make home visits and supervise the children's study remotely [8].

4.3. National and Social Policy

4.3.1. Mobilize social forces, increase publicity, coordinate various parties and build a social guardianship system.

The mass media should pay more attention to and report left-behind children, increase their exposure, and call on more individuals, enterprises and groups to pay attention to the problems of left-behind children. At the same time, retired civil servants of appropriate age, teachers and other personnel are called upon to set up "caring service team for left-behind children" and other love relief activities [22]. Social enterprises are also called upon to actively participate in the ranks of caring about left-behind children, and village committees also actively organize left-behind children to participate in positive energy activities, so as to build a common foundation for the construction of rural spiritual civilization. In order to create a comprehensive, multi-angle, three-dimensional and effective social guardianship system of the strong engine.

4.3.2. Gradually break the shackles of nearby schooling for rural children.

For example, the requirements for admission of qualified foreign students are gradually relaxed. Unreasonable tuition and miscellaneous fees are exempted, and scholarships, grants and other financial support are provided for them [23]. Establish reasonable and effective help system can carry out one-to-one help with each university, regularly send university students to the countryside to help; We will step up efforts to develop rural areas and schools, accelerate rural revitalization, improve rural infrastructure, raise the salaries and benefits of rural teachers, and attract more talents to rural areas.

4.3.3. Create a good social environment for the growth of left-behind children.

In order to avoid negative social energy, game arcades and gambling venues should be supervised in rural areas, and content of entertainment apps such as Tiktok and Kwai should be restricted and reviewed [4].

5. CONCLUSION

Our paper mainly discusses the causes, phenomena and countermeasures of the psychological problems of left-behind children in rural China in the form of a literature review from three different dimensions. Previous papers have clearly explained the situation and plight of left-behind children in rural areas, but they are insufficient especially in response measures. For example, in some studies, only the construction of the guardianship system and special files and the promotion

of parent-child interaction were mentioned [5]. Some studies suggested to strengthen mental health education management and to perfect the mental health education system [24]. Other studies indicated to improve the files of left-behind children in rural areas and create an environment that cares for left-behind children [14]. Based on these previous suggestions, we have summarized the measures into three different perspectives of individuals, schools, and the country through a lot of research, and refined the research further.

REFERENCES

- [1] Li Na. (2016). Research on hidden mental health problems and causes of left-behind children. *Insight* (20), 2.
- [2] Zhao Fucui. (2009). Research on rural left-behind children from the perspective of "three rural issues". *Journal of Liaocheng University (Social Science Edition)* (2), 4.
- [3] Several Opinions of the State Council on Solving the Problem of Migrant Workers
- [4] Wang Zheng & Zhang Junyan. (2021). Thoughts on mental health education for left-behind children in rural areas. *Scientific Consultation (Technology-Management)* (07), 243-244.
- [5] Wang Yaning. (2021). Analysis of influencing factors and countermeasures of mental health education for left-behind children in rural areas. *The Guide of Science & Education* (02), 185-186.
- [6] Hu Feng, & Li Shantong. (2009). The impact of parents' migrant work on the education of left-behind children in rural areas: an empirical analysis based on a survey of migrant workers in 5 cities. *Management World* (2), 8.
- [7] Yu Yongfang. A study on parenting styles of left-behind children in rural areas. (Doctoral dissertation, Jiangxi Agricultural University).
- [8] Gu Chuanhua, Chen Huichang, & Xu Jingjing. (2003). Early family environment and parenting styles of creative figures in modern Chinese society. *Psychological development and education*, 19(4), 6.
- [9] Ye Feng, & Jin Shaojun. (2006). Study on psychological Problems and countermeasures of rural left-behind children. *Nei Jiang Science & Technology*, (3), 77-77.
- [10] An Yali, Gao Xiaochun & Lu Hong. (2009). Rethinking the education problem of rural left-behind children. *Journal of Zhengzhou Institute of Aeronautical Industry Management*

- (*Social Science Edition*) (06),132-134.
Doi:10.19327/j.cnki.zuaxb.1009-1750.2009.06.041
- [11] Xu Wenting. (2013). Personality problems of rural left-behind children. *Economic Research Guide* (26), 2.
- [12] Liangmiao. (2020). On the enlightenment of positive psychology to the mental health education of rural left-behind children. *Psychologies Magazine* (17), 2.
- [13] Li Haoqiu. Social work intervention of psychological problems of left-behind children. (*Doctoral dissertation, Central China Normal University*).
- [14] Pei yingshan.(2021).Study on mental health education of rural left-behind children. *Gansu Science and Technology* (10),53-54+16. Doi:CNKI:SUN:GSKJ.0.2021-10-020.
- [15] Zhou Zongkui, Sun Xiaojun, & Fan Cuiying. (2007). Psychological Development problems and countermeasures of rural left-behind children. *Journal of South China Normal University (Social Science Edition)* (6), 7.
- [16] Cai Chongyang. Study on mental health problems of rural left-behind children. (*Doctoral dissertation, Hunan Normal University*).
- [17] Zhang Junling. (2008). Research on the Psychological Problems of the Rear Children in the countryside in China (*Master Dissertation, South-Central University for Nationalities*).
- [18] Lei Junlin.(2020). Research on Mental Health Education of Left-behind Children in Rural Schools. *Gansu Education* (06),25. Doi:CNKI:SUN:GSJY.0.2020-06-017.
- [19] Liulu.(2014). Research on the Influence of Family Function Deficiency on Rural Left-behind Children and Solutions. *Divineland* (17),256-257. Doi:CNKI:SUN:SHZH.0.2014-17-219.
- [20] Duan Chengrong, Lv Danli & Wang Zongping.(2014). Family Education and School Education of Rural Left-behind Children under the Background of Urbanization. *Peking University Education Review* (03),13-29+188-189. Doi:10.19355/j.cnki.1671-9468.2014.03.003.
- [21] Tian Yanli.(2017). Analysis of Family Education Problems and Countermeasures of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas. *The Farmers Consultant* (18),51+176. doi:CNKI:SUN:NJCM.0.2017-18-047.
- [22] Liang Jianhua.(2010). Study on Psychological Problems and Countermeasures of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas. *Youth Development Forum* (01),14-16. doi:CNKI:SUN:JXST.0.2010-01-007.
- [23] He Daoli.(2012). Causes and Countermeasures of Psychological Problems of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas. *New Curriculum* (05),138-139. doi:CNKI:SUN:XKCZ.0.2012-05-371.
- [24] Wangshu.(2019). Problems and Countermeasures of Mental Health Education for Left-behind Children in Rural Areas. (eds.) *Proceedings of the 2019 South China Expo Symposium (IV)* (pp.558-560).