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# Current Situation and Mental Health and Intervention Measures of Left-behind Children

Hongze YANG\*

School of Marxism, University of Science and Technology Liaoning, Anshan 114051, China

**Abstract** In the *Outline of the Twelfth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China*, it proposed of improving distribution and form of urbanization and strengthening urbanization management. With acceleration of the urbanization, numerous rural labors flow to cities, and the number of left-behind children becomes increasingly large, which not only increases burden of family and education, but also gives rise to many mental problems. Due to lack of family education, many left-behind children have mental, emotional and ethical disorder and problem, which creates hidden trouble for building a harmonious society and economic development. This paper analyzed current situation and factors influencing mental health of left-behind children, including family environment, grandparent upbringing, and school environment. Finally, it came up with pertinent intervention measures from changing ideas of parents, improving the relationship between parents and children, and improving mental health education of schools.

**Key words** Left-behind children, Mental health, Grandparent upbringing, Intervention measures

## 1 Introduction

Left-behind children are rural children under the age of 18 who do not live together with their parents because their parents have gone to other places for migrant works. They have following characteristics: (i) one or all parents doing migrant work; (ii) not living together with their parents for 6 months or longer; (iii) being under the age of 18. With acceleration of China's urbanization and frequent flow of urban and rural population, the number of left-behind children is expanding. According to data of the sixth population census in China, the number of left-behind children in China reached 61.0255 million, accounting for 37.7% of total rural children. Scholars have found that left-behind children have serious problem of mental health, which greatly influences their physical and psychological growth and school performance, and becomes a primary issue to be solved in mental health education at present stage. From the perspective of psychology, we would analyze current situation and influencing factors of mental health of left-behind children and come up with pertinent recommendations.

## 2 Current situation of mental health of left-behind children in China

**2.1 Slow intellectual growth due to lack of education of their parents** The intellectual ability refers to the skills required to think critically, see connections between disciplines and problem solve in new or changing situations. It is the level of intelligence and represents the learning ability or the ability of solving problems. Psychological measurement of the intellectual ability

can be denoted by the intelligence quotient (IQ). The intelligence quotient is an intelligence test score that is obtained by dividing mental age, which reflects the age-graded level of performance as derived from population norms.

At present, development scope and approach for obtaining experience for cognitive ability of left-behind children are relatively simple. Such objective situation obstructs the development of ability of left-behind children in solving problems. Researches have shown that academic performance of left-behind children is generally lower than urban children. At the same time, the anxiety level of left-behind children is higher than other children, showing problems of sick of learning, playing truant, internet addiction, and gambling. Children are future of the nation, thus we should focus on developing their innovation ability, while the innovation ability is an essential part of intellectual ability. In the three-dimensional structure model of intelligence, Guilford stated that the creative intelligence is divergent thinking. Divergent thinking is a thought process or method used to generate creative ideas by exploring many possible solutions. Children with higher score in divergent thinking are often encouraged by parents, and have full freedom in exploring their interests. Therefore, slow development or weak innovation ability of left-behind children is closely connected with their family environment.

**2.2 Difficult emotion adjustment due to lack of guidance of parents** Emotion is any relatively brief conscious experience characterized by intense mental activity and a high degree of pleasure or displeasure. It is experience of attitude towards objective things when physiological or social demands of people are satisfied or not. It may lead to changes in inner experience, behavior level and physiological reaction. Children about 3 years old, due to rapid growth of cognitive ability, can adjust the emotional reaction in the form of speech.

Thompson held that emotional adjustment is an internal and

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\* Corresponding author. E-mail: 10789623@qq.com

external process of monitoring, evaluating and correcting emotional reaction by an individual for fulfilling objectives. An individual may adjust emotion through emotional adjustment strategies or mechanisms. Therefore, children often use conscious emotional adjustment strategies and make them become automatic emotional adjustment mechanism. Emotional adjustment needs guidance and assistance of parents.

However, the family situation of left-behind children is different from normal families. Parents of left-behind children are not at home for a long time, they can not directly respond to emotion of their children and have to rely on their parents or parents-in-law, namely, grandparents of left-behind children. Researches indicate that patients with depression and anxiety often use meditation, catastrophic, expression inhibition and other non-adaptive emotional adjustment strategies.

Therefore, due to the lack of adaptive emotional adjustment strategies, left-behind children often have emotional adjustment difficulties, which may develop into more serious mental or psychological illness.

**2.3 Deviation of moral behavior resulted from lack of parental care** Pro-social behavior is any act that is beneficial to others, such as sharing the hardship with others, helping or rescuing others, cooperating, or simply consoling companions. According to researches, before the formal moral education, children will have similar performance of pro-social behavior, 12 to 18 months old children occasionally give toys to the companions, 2-year-old children may give toys to companions even their toys are insufficient.

Few left-behind children do so, such individual difference is determined by the family environment to a certain extent. Relative to moral behavior such as pro-social behavior, aggressive behavior is one of the most frequent non-moral acts of children and adolescents. Results indicate that when children go to primary school, 70% of them will reduce physical attack behavior significantly, 27% children sometimes have moderate level of physical attacks, which will also decrease with age growth. Throughout the school age, there are still 3% children having stable performance of a high level of physical attack (NICHD National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Early Child Care Research Network, 2004). More and more evidences prove that indifference and mutual ignorance of parents are more predictive of children's problem behavior. Therefore, left-behind children may have more non-moral behavior problems.

### 3 Influencing factors of mental health of left-behind children in China

**3.1 Family environment** Since 1940, every 10 years, the average IQ of citizens would increase by 3 points, this phenomenon is known as the "Flynn effect", namely, the substantial and long-sustained increase in both fluid and crystallized intelligence test scores measured in many parts of the world. According to researches, the IQ of children has large fluctuation with the growth of

age, the average range of fluctuation is more than 20 points.

If children live in a stimulating environment and can constantly obtain challenging cognitive tasks, their IQ will reach an average or higher level. In infancy, the involvement of parents in child activities, such as more use of adult language in the interactive games with children, will promote the development of children's language ability; if language of parents is humorous, it will make children feel interesting, children will imitate in the future to establish a good companion relationship.

For pre-school children, enthusiasm and encouragement language and academic behavior of parents have close connection with children's future intellectual performance. Colin Berg proposed the "cumulative defect hypothesis": the poor environment will hinder the development of intelligence, and such inhibitory effect will accumulate over time. The quality or characteristics of family environment play a decisive role in the intellectual performance of children. Simolov listed 10 risk factors that may lead to low intelligence of children, and nine of them are related to the family environment, including single-parent families, low educational level of parents, and poor economic conditions.

In addition, words and deeds of parents also have very important influence on emotional and moral behavior of children. Because of lower educational level, parents of left-behind children have little understanding of children's education, can not grasp the rules of psychological development and changes of children, and can not provide timely guidance and assistance. They either do not intervene or have management bias, leading to psychological problems of many left-behind children. Therefore, the left-behind children often show emotional disorders and aggressive behavior.

**3.2 Grandparent upbringing** Many left-behind children are brought up by their grandparents because their parents do migrant work. The grandparent upbringing has become the main mode of family education for left-behind children, but this type of education will have a negative impact on the mental health of left-behind children.

Firstly, grandparents of left-behind children usually spoil their grandchildren. Because of the lack of warmth of their parents, grandparents are particularly sensitive to the needs of their left-behind children, and easily compromise with emotional reaction of their grandchildren. They will be reluctant to criticize their grandchildren just like the parents of left-behind children. They satisfy the material needs of left-behind children as far as possible. As time passes, left-behind children will have a more serious problem of psychological dependence on their grandparents and self-centered thinking. Secondly, most grandparents of the left-behind children have low educational level, traditional and conservative thinking, and are reluctant to accept new things, leading to serious generation gap. Thirdly, grandparents' education of left-behind children mainly remains in the concept of "bringing up the child as much as possible" rather than "how to properly bring the child up".

Therefore, in the aspect of creating growth environment and

purchasing toys for children, they are not better than other families, leading to slow intellectual development of left-behind children. Finally, grandparents of the left-behind children are old and have weak physical condition, and some have to undertake farming work, thus they have no more energy to care about the education of left-behind children, resulting in many left-behind children having laissez-faire problem.

**3.3 School environment** Restricted by the economic development level, the primary schools and middle schools where left-behind children stay have a big gap with urban schools in teaching level. Although the education department of China attaches great importance to mental health education, the general teaching quality fails to meet the demands of the present situation. Mental health development of primary and middle schools in rural areas seriously lags behind, the mental health education teachers are mainly undertaken by teachers of other disciplines or school physicians or head teachers concurrently and seldom by professional psychology teachers. Mental health education teachers need a solid psychological knowledge and basic theory. Part-time teachers lack psychological knowledge and theory, and are thus influenced by ideological and political education in the process of practical teaching, and take the manner of preaching and do some things in violations of the principles of mental health education. This not only leads to the result of failure to achieve the purpose of psychological counseling and treatment, but also may produce opposite effect.

Besides, the attitude of teachers to left-behind children may affect the academic performance of left-behind children. Rosenthal, Doctor of Harvard University, randomly selected some students and told to other teachers that these children had higher IQ than other children, but please teach them as usual, and do not let children or parents know they are selected. One year later, academic performance of these students is several times higher than other students. The Rosenthal effect emphasizes positive evaluation of the educated in educational activities.

However, many teachers are not positive or even negative about the education attitude towards the left-behind children, and adopt a brutal and blame education method for the offence of left-behind children.

## **4 Intervention measures for mental health of left-behind children in China**

**4.1 Government should attach great importance and parents should strength learning, to improve education concept of left-behind children** Parents are the first teacher of children in the process of children's growth, and parents have a significant influence on psychological development of children. The education and training of parents of the left-behind children should attract attention of relevant government departments. Urban communities and the unit of migrant workers can regularly set up some parent schools to provide education and training seminars, and create opportunities for parents of left-behind children to learn some knowledge of children education.

Parents of left-behind children need to learn some knowledge about growth and educational psychology, know the rules of children's psychological development, and learn the right education methods to guide children's emotional and moral behavior. Parents should create excellent environment for the growth of their children as much as possible, to meet the needs of the children in material, and also should care about the psychological needs of their children. Parents may work with children to come up with some growth tasks, and they may communicate the completion of tasks by telephone, Internet and other means, to minimize the separation anxiety of children. For emotional adjustment difficulties of left-behind children, parents should make proper treatment, should not follow laissez-faire principle or make rude treatment, but should make use of psychological knowledge to effectively guide and communicate, understand psychological feelings of children, and teach children how to deal with stresses properly. For the moral behavior deviation of left-behind children, parents should pay attention promptly, give the necessary criticism and education, and instruct children with moral values and interpersonal skills, so as to effectively interfere with the psychological problems of the children.

### **4.2 Parents should communicate with left-behind children by many channels to increase the parent-child contact and improve the growth environment for left-behind children**

Because the parents of left-behind children do migrant works nearly all year round, seldom communicate with children face to face, the parent-child relationship will become relatively alienated. Many left-behind children have a feeling of resentment towards their parents, while the parents have feeling of guilty towards their children. Chinese scholar Xu Weimin found that left-behind children who frequently communicate with their parents have the frequency of behavioral problems of 37.5%, while for the left-behind children who have little communication with their parents, the occurrence rate of behavioral problems is as high as 51.4%. Therefore, parents should try to communicate with their children as much as possible, and should bring their children around as far as possible.

When conditions permit, parents may communicate with children through video chat, Internet phone or other means, to care about children's learning, life, and so on, to let left-behind children feel care and warmth of their parents. Parents should keep in touch with school teachers to solve various problems of their children in school, to help children to gradually integrate into the collective life, and master the skills to get along with others, so as to establish a good relationship with their peers. Grandparents of left-behind children also should communicate with parents of their grandchildren to maintain communication, learn new things, and keep growth and progress with their children and grandchildren.

**4.3 It is recommended to improve mental health education of schools to improve education environment of left-behind children** After entering the school age, school education will have an important impact on left-behind children. Schools should

