

FAMILY ENVIRONMENT AS PREDICTOR OF EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS IN SCHOOL CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the predictive association of perceived family environment with emotional and behavioral problems in school children. After detailed literature review it was hypothesized that perceived intrafamilial issues would predict emotional and behavioral problems in school children. Sample consists of 591 school children with age range of 12 to 18 years. The personal information form, Urdu versions of family environment scale and school children problem scales were used. Regression analysis was applied to investigate the predictive association of perceived family environment with emotional and behavioral problems. Obtained results indicated that children's perception of intrafamilial issues predicted the emotional and behavioral problems. Further, feeling of being rejected was the most significantly associated outcome of undesirable family environment followed by academic problems and aggression. Implications for prevention of emotional and behavioral problems are discussed.

Keywords: Family environment, aggression, emotional, academic problems

INTRODUCTION

Family is the first nursery for children to acquire emotional, social and psychological skills by providing nurturing and encouraging environment in home. Involvement of family members can have detrimental effect throughout on an individual's life. Particularly, childhood and adolescence is the most crucial and vulnerable period of life. During this phase of life, their ability to learn from and about world is on its peak, at the same time, they are dependent on others for long period specifically in eastern cultures. Studies conducted over the years provide basic understanding that relationship with parents and siblings have substantial impact in cognitive, social and emotional development. For instance, involvement of family members is linked to academic adherence and achievement, decreased behavioral problems in school, lower conduct problems, improve social skills, higher self-esteem and psychological well-being in children and adolescents (Domina, 2005; Hill, Castellino, Lansford, Nowlin, Dodge, Bates, Pettit, 2004; Li, Liu, Lv, Xu., Wang, Huntsinger, 2015; Melby, Conger, Fang, Wickrama, & Conger, 2008; Mellon, & Moutavelis, 2009).

After this non-formal educational institute, children entered in school where they started formal education and face challenges of life outside home. School provides conducive environment to children but at the same time it placed number of demands to learn and

exhibit academic and psychosocial skills. For example, school environment brings many challenges in form of academic attainment, peer pressure, fear of failures, parental expectations etc that may contribute to develop emotional and behavioral issues. Epidemiological studies reported that prevalence of emotional and behavioral issues is 16% to 21% in Pakistani school children (Saleem & Mahmood, 2011). Another cross-sectional study conducted on school children revealed that 34.4% and 35.8% children are experiencing emotional and behavioral problems as reported by parents and school teachers respectively (Syed, Hussein, & Haidry, 2009). These alarming figures underscore those contributing factors which put school children to at risk to develop emotional and behavioral issues.

Family has been considered as primary agent to channelize an individual's potential to perform set roles for rest of their lives and to achieve optimal outcomes. Parents who are unable to provide warm and nurturing environment to their children it put them at risk to develop emotional and behavioral problems at later stages of life. A substantial body of studies evidenced that adolescence who experience undesirable family environment in early childhood use substance (Sitnick, Shaw, & Hyde, 2014), at risk to experience peer rejection (Dodge, Lansford, Burks, Bates, Pettit, Fontaine, & Price, 2003), somatic complaints (Evans, Keenan, & Shipton, 2007) social anxiety (Hastings, Rubin, & Mielcarek, 2005), suicidal behaviors (Fotti, Katz, Afifi, & Cox, 2006) and maladjustment in school (Coplan, Arbeau, & Armer, 2008).

Family is considered a dynamic unit of society as it could be change with addition or loss of any family member. This complexity of family unit is understandable by conceptualizing interdependent relationships of family members e.g. relationship of siblings with their parents as well as with each other. Moreover, quality of sibling relationship is effected by warmth and disciplinary practices exhibited by parents, and nourishing environment provided at home (Kretschmer, & Pike, 2009). A study highlighted effects of within family and between family members relation by indicating that child who receive more parental hostility exhibited greater externalizing problems than his or her siblings (Richmond, & Stocker, 2008). In children and adolescence, relationship with siblings also contribute to negative outcomes including externalizing problems (Richmond, Stocker, & Rienks, 2005) conduct problems (Buist, Dekovic, & Prinzie, 2013) and psychosocial issues (Menesini, Camodeca, & Nocentini, 2010). On the other hand, harmonious and intimate relationship with siblings mitigates difficulties in social relationships (Kramer, 2011), protect against school related difficulties (Milevsky, & Levitt, 2005), depression (Kim, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2007) decrease feeling of loneliness, enhance self-esteem and improve interaction with peers (Yeh, & Lempers, 2004).

Hence, it is important to understand school children's perceptions about family environment to address and to prevent negative outcomes among this at risk population. There is need to conduct studies on this issue is also important because rate of emotional and behavioral problems among Pakistani children and adolescence is somewhat higher compared to other countries (Syed, Hussein, & Haidry, 2007). Quite interestingly, Asian parents are less likely to show parental warmth (Bodovski & Youn, 2010). Realizing these facts, present study focused on middle and late adolescent students of school because extensive physical, and psycho-social changes take place in this period. Based on the earlier researches it was hypothesized that undesirable family environment (perceived intrafamilial conflicts) would predict emotional and behavioral problems in school children.

METHOD

Sample

Sample of this study consisted on 591 school children including 292 females and 299 males. The age of participants ranged from 12-18 years with mean age of 14.7 (SD 1.3). They were randomly selected from different government and private schools.

Measures

Personal Information Form

Personal information form was used to obtain information about age, gender, education and family system. To follow inclusion criteria, questions were asked about parents' marital status and only those children were included who have both parents alive and living together. Questions to know about any existing psychological and biological problem in children and parents were also asked to exclude these students.

The Index family relation scale

The index of family relation (IFR) is comprised of 18 items, originally developed by Hudson (1982) to measure level of problems perceived by family members (parents and children) in their relationships with each other. It is rated on five-point likert scale ranging from none of the time to all the time. Higher scores indicate higher intera-familial problems. In this study, Urdu version of index of family relation (Shah, & Aziz, 1993) was used.

School children problem scale

This is an indigenous self-report scale to screen and assess emotional and behavioral problems in school children (Saleem, & Sadia, 2011). It consists of 88 items based on commonly reported problems by school children. It is comprised of six subscales; Anxiousness, Academic Problems, Aggression, Social Withdrawal, Feeling of being Rejection, Somatic Problems. Each item is scored on four point likert scale. High score is indicative of issues in each domain.

Procedure

First, permission for data collection was obtained by authorities of randomly selected schools. Data was collected in class room like setting from maximum of two regular classes of each school. A trained graduate student administered self-reported questionnaires with help of class teacher. Consent was obtained by providing consent form describing objectives of study, potential benefits of study, and rights of participants. They were informed that their participation is voluntarily. After getting consent of participants, personal Information form, index of family environment scale and school children problem scale were administered respectively. Researcher was present there to assist participants in case of any difficulty and to debriefed at the end of data collection

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Emotional and behavioral problems in school children had gained attention of researchers over the years posits that children are greatly effected by conflict between family members and stress experienced in home environment. Despite plethora of research work, there is paucity of empirical evidences to understand effects of familial characteristics on emotional and behavioral development of child in Pakistan specifically in small cities. Knowing the significance of this issue, this study aimed to determine the predictive relationship of perceived interfamilial stress with emotional and behavioral issues in school children. Results indicated that existing family patterns are significantly associated with internal and external

problems in school children, showing in Table No. 3. This is in harmonious with previous studies suggesting that children living in undesirable family environment are experiencing emotional and behavioral problems (Demby, Riggs, & Kaminski, 2015; Taylor, Seaton, & Dominguez, 2008; Hughes & Gullone, 2008). This finding is particularly relevant with cultural context as sample of this study is drawn from small city of Pakistan where children spend more time with family for prolong period compared to individualistic culture. More so, caregivers encouraged to establish more given and interdependent form of relationship (Adams, 2005), to give in on elders demands, promote family harmony compared to autonomy. Consequently, they influence and influenced by personal and familial characteristics of each other.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of Demographic Variables*

Variables with Descriptions	F	%
Gender		
Male	299	50.6
Female	292	49.4
Age in Years		
From 12-15 years	414	70.1
From 16-18 years	177	29.9
Grade		
8 th	193	32.7
9 th	239	40.4
10 th	159	26.9
Family System		
Nuclear	389	65.8
Joint	202	34.2
School System		
Government	521	88.2
Private	70	11.8

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics of study Variables*

Variables	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD
Age in years	12	18	14.74	1.315
Anxiousness	0	64	20.13	12.455
Academic problems	0	47	9.63	7.998
Aggression	0	47	10.89	8.288
Social Withdrawal	0	42	12.21	7.938
Feeling of being rejection	0	27	5.77	5.139
Somatic Problems	0	27	7.75	5.018
School Children Problems Scale	0	245	66.37	38.143
Index Family Relation	12	73	25.71	8.252

Table 3. Summary of Linear Regression with perceived family environment as predictor of emotional and behavioral problems

Variables	Beta	Standard Error	Standard Beta	R	R ²
Anxiousness	.465	.059	.308	.308	.095
Academic problems	.485	.035	.500	.500	.250
Aggression	.411	.038	.410	.410	.168
Social Withdrawal	.317	.037	.330	.330	.109
Rejection	.343	.021	.550	.550	.303
Somatic Problems	.175	.024	.288	.288	.083
Total SCPS	2.213	.167	.479	.479	.229

With regard to subdomains of school problems scale, it was found that feelings of rejection experienced by children living in undesirable environment are top of the list of issues, as shown in Table No. 3. Children who are facing intrafamilial issues also feel rejected by parents, siblings and teachers which is also confirmed by previous studies (e.g. Rohner, 1986, 2004; Wolberg, 1944). Academic problems are also found to be significantly associated with family problems. These findings corroborated prior studies which indicated that school children living in undesirable family environment could not show performance in school (Melby et al., 2008; Wang, Hill, & Hofkens, 2014). Results also showed that children living in harmful family environment tended to report more aggression which is consisted with other studies (Andreas, Watson, 2009; Henneberger, Varga, Moudy, Tolan, 2016; Johnson, 2003). Conflicts in family also increases the likelihood to experience social withdrawal, anxiousness and somatic complaints as reported by school children participated in this study and other similar studies (Lansford et al., 2002; Rubin, Root, Bowker, 2010).

In sum, this study has provided some evidences on the salience of family environment on school children's emotional and behavioral pattern which in turn impact their life in long run. The result has shown that children living in conflicting family environment are experiencing emotional and behavioral issues including feelings of being rejected, academic problems, aggression, social withdrawal, anxiousness and somatic complaints.

This study has certain limitations. Study design does not determine causal relation, however, it highlight presence of emotional and behavioral problems and its association which provides direction for future research. Sample was extracted from schools situated in urban areas, however, based on findings of this study future researches elucidate this issue more by using other research designs, divergent population as well as multiple source of information such as parents, teachers and child. In line with studies conducted over the globe, implications can be drawn for psychological well-being of this at risk population. This study primarily highlights the contribution of healthy family environment in positive psychosocial development of child that pointed towards the need to conduct further researches immediately to determine rate of this issue in diverse population and its impact. These findings guide mental health professionals and policy makers to deploy mental health centers to establish and implement programs aimed to prevention and treatment of emotional and behavioral issues as well as to promote mental health. Obtained findings will assist parents and educationists to aware how home environment play an important role to develop a psychologically healthy personality. Results will guide school administration to establish relationship with parents in right direction to gravitating away the negative impact of home environment as well as to improve performance in school.

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