

Mental health problems of rural left-behind children and contributing factors

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Abstract: With the rapid development of China's social economy, an increasing number of rural young and middle-aged laborers have entered cities, giving rise to a new special group—left-behind children. Left-behind children are a group that requires high attention from all sectors of society, and their mental health problems are particularly concerning. This study takes the left-behind children in Hu jia Zhuang Village, Hu xian County, Shaanxi Province as the research object, and conducts psychological testing on them using the Mental Health Test (MHT) for adolescents. The results indicate that most left-behind children in this village have relatively severe psychological problems, including loneliness tendency, learning anxiety, interpersonal anxiety, self-blame tendency, and physical symptoms. Based on the specific psychological problems identified and their related causes, this study provides a scientific and effective basis for social work intervention in the mental health problems of rural left-behind children.

Keywords: rural left-behind children, mental health, social work

1. Introduction

As China's urbanization continues to accelerate, a large number of rural laborers have entered cities to work. However, due to issues such as wage levels and household registration, they have no choice but to leave their children at home to be cared for by elderly relatives, relatives, or neighbors, thereby producing a large number of rural left-behind children [1]. According to statistics from the All-China Women's Federation, the total number of rural left-behind children in China has exceeded 61 million, accounting for approximately 23% of the national child population, and this figure continues to grow. Such a vast group exhibits problems in various aspects. In particular, because left-behind children lack proper guidance, companionship, and encouragement from their parents in daily life, they suffer tremendous psychological harm [2]. Therefore, the psychological problems of left-behind children have become a social issue that cannot be ignored. This study takes Hu jia Zhuang Village, Hu xian County, Xi'an City as the survey location, and the left-behind children in this village as the survey subjects. The living conditions of left-behind children in Hu jia Zhuang Village are investigated through field visits and household surveys as well as questionnaire completion. Through the above relevant research, it is hoped that the specific problems and their causes existing among the left-behind children in this village can be summarized to the greatest extent possible, providing a scientific and effective basis for future social work in addressing the issues of rural left-behind children.

2. Research subjects

Hu jia Zhuang Village has 220 households and 1,020 registered residents, with an actual population of over 840 people. Approximately 150 people from the village work outside, accounting for 17.9% of the actual population. There are 120 students under the age of 16, accounting for 14% of the actual population; 46 preschool children, accounting for 5% of the actual population; over 40 left-behind children, accounting for 5% of the actual population; 103 people over the age of 60, accounting for 12% of the actual population; 74 people over the age of 65, accounting for 9% of the actual population; and 3 empty-nest elderly, accounting for 0.004% of the actual population. Within the village, there is the Ronghua Grape Estate,

which leases land from the villagers for collective grape cultivation. The village committee and the grape estate operate together, jointly promoting economic development and significantly improving the villagers' living standards.

3. The mental health status of left-behind children

This study administered the Mental Health Test (MHT) for adolescents to 40 left-behind children in Hu jia Zhuang Village. The MHT assesses eight examination items including learning anxiety, interpersonal anxiety, loneliness tendency, self-blame tendency, hypersensitivity tendency, physical symptoms, phobia tendency, and impulsivity tendency. Based on the scores, the mental health level of the test subjects can be classified into three grades: mentally healthy (total score ≤ 55), having mild psychological problems (total score ≥ 56 and ≤ 64), and having severe psychological problems (total score ≥ 65).

Table 1 Scores Distribution of Various Content Scales in the MHT Psychological Measurement Scale

Category	Below 3 points	3 to 8 points	8 points and above
Learning Anxiety	5	9	26
Interpersonal Anxiety	4	5	31
Loneliness Tendency	3	4	33
Self-Blame Tendency	7	8	25
Hypersensitivity Tendency	11	15	14
Physical Symptoms	5	7	28
Phobia Tendency	13	13	14
Impulsivity Tendency	5	20	15
Percentage	16.60%	25.30%	58.10%

Table 1 indicates that a relatively large number of left-behind children in this village have serious problems in loneliness tendency, learning anxiety, interpersonal anxiety, self-blame tendency, and physical symptoms. This demonstrates that the long-term lack of parental care and education among left-behind children in Hu jia Zhuang Village has resulted in relatively prominent psychological problems such as introverted personality, learning difficulties, and poor social competence [3].

4. Causes of mental health problems among rural left-behind children

4.1. The absence of family affection

4.1.1. The emotional plight of left-behind children

Education without family affection is incomplete education, and parental love cannot be replaced by any other form of familial affection. Parents working in cities causes left-behind children to be deprived of familial care for extended periods, which further leads to feelings of helplessness, anxiety, and loneliness in children's inner worlds. Psychological research indicates that children possess an innate attachment to their parents; the degree of this attachment directly affects children's trust in their surroundings, as well as their growth, emotional maturity, and the completeness of their personality development [4]. Due to their parents' long-term absence for work, left-behind children suffer from the loss of family affection, with psychological problems gradually becoming prominent. This results in a lack of security in their surrounding environment and a lack of trust in people around them; in severe cases, this deficiency of family affection can even affect their entire lives.

4.1.2. Communication barriers and impeded psychological development

Additionally, the surrogate caregivers of left-behind children, such as grandparents, uncles, and aunts, do not have the extra energy, time, attention, or capacity to focus on the children's psychological problems. They typically only satisfy the children's basic living needs, such as paying tuition fees on time and ensuring meals meet the children's requirements, while generally not paying much attention to other matters. Even if grandparents care for the children with great dedication, the generation gap between grandparents and grandchildren cannot be ignored. They do not know how to communicate with the children, how to educate and accompany them, and their speech tends to be nagging. Some children are in the rebellious adolescent period, a stage most prone to oppositional psychology, which is already a difficult time to manage and constrain. Having them live with grandparents will inevitably hinder their psychological development. The combination of various factors makes it difficult for left-behind children to engage in effective communication with them. Furthermore, left-behind children tend to prefer hiding their own thoughts and are unwilling to share with others, especially unhappy matters. Over time, it is not difficult to imagine that they gradually develop certain psychological disorder problems [5].

4.1.3. The growth risks of left-behind children

Besides, most left-behind children unconsciously envy their peers from intact families, envying that their parents can visit and accompany them frequently. In the process of interacting with their peer groups, they often feel that their own parents are not around, producing feelings of inferiority and a sense of being lesser than others. Without the help of their parents, left-behind children are blind and impulsive in life, have deficiencies in their personalities, and are highly susceptible to the influence of socially undesirable groups, forming bad behavioral habits and creating bad hidden dangers for society. These are all issues that we need to be concerned about.

4.2. Parental cognitive bias

The parents of left-behind children generally belong to a demographic with relatively low cognitive awareness and not particularly high overall quality. Among them, many believe that earning enough money to support the family is sufficient, and never consider staying at home to accompany their children or communicating more with them as important or necessary matters. Some work outside and only return home once a year, hastily reuniting with their children before having to leave immediately, neglecting to understand their children's inner worlds. They feel that earning money is for their children to spend, that having money is enough, that being able to buy what they want is love, that material things are everything, and that companionship is not important. However, their lack of time to accompany their children and participate in their growth causes many left-behind children to be psychologically less mature than their peers, to have weaker self-control, and to be less capable of discerning right from wrong [6]. Therefore, left-behind children are more prone to developing bad habits such as smoking and internet addiction. Additionally, left-behind children in adolescence face many physical and psychological confusions that require parental involvement to resolve, but their parents are working in distant places and simply do not have the time or energy to address their children's problems. This is also a cause of the psychological problems among left-behind children.

4.3. Improper school management and teacher education

Schools are important venues for nurturing children. In the public eye, school education should rightfully bear part of the responsibility for managing children. However, the reality does not align with the ideal situation. On the one hand, schools need to pursue enrollment rates, and therefore emphasize the importance of exam-oriented education, thereby neglecting children's psychological problems. They even less attend to the psychological and emotional needs of left-behind children, so it is not surprising that the psychological problems of left-behind children accumulate more and more [7]. On the other hand, in our conventional thinking, the academic performance of left-behind children is generally not very outstanding. Teachers tend to devote more attention to high-performing students than to low-performing students. Most students with poor academic performance are "left-behind children." When they do not receive the attention they deserve from teachers, left-behind children gradually lose interest in learning, their academic performance cannot improve, they receive more criticism, and the emergence of psychological problems is no longer surprising.

4.4. Learning ability

In rural areas, many people believe that education is the only way to escape poverty. The parents of left-behind children work outside to earn money precisely to support their children's schooling at home, hoping they can have a better future. Therefore, these parents are most concerned about their children's academic performance. The pressure from parents, school, and themselves weighs heavily on the shoulders of left-behind children. Some left-behind children worry greatly that their academic performance will not be ideal, fearing that they will cause their parents worry and disappointment. Problems such as poor self-control, low learning interest, and inferiority complex are common learning obstacles faced by left-behind children [8]. Without parents at home to accompany them, without their own emphasis on education, and without the attention of surrogate caregivers, the learning abilities and intelligence of left-behind children cannot be effectively developed, resulting in unsatisfactory academic performance. However, society generally places great importance on children's academic performance. Consequently, they gradually lose self-confidence, develop aversion to learning and feelings of inferiority, and their psychological problems slowly expand.

4.5. Personality factors

In the survey, the author found that the personalities of many left-behind children tend to be introverted and withdrawn, and some children show a certain tendency toward depression. Because their parents are not around and they lack parental love, what they experience most is loneliness and helplessness, so they easily develop withdrawn personalities. Additionally, when encountering setbacks, left-behind children are mostly unable to communicate well with their relatives and friends, and they habitually choose to keep things bottled up inside themselves. Over time, this produces autistic tendencies. Due to their insufficient ideas and experience, they are frequently troubled by minor matters, easily generate hopeless thoughts about life, and depression problems follow accordingly. The minds of left-behind children are not fully developed, and they themselves lack a sense of security and belonging. The parents of left-behind children basically work outside for livelihood, and their family circumstances are generally poor, which makes it easy for left-behind children to develop feelings of inferiority in comparison with non-left-behind children. At the same time, with parents not around, they lack support in daily life and study, always feeling lesser than others. Some non-left-behind children may also bully left-behind children or subject them to personal attacks, which makes left-behind children even more inferior, lose confidence, and even produce fear [9]. Meanwhile, children encounter many novel things in the process of growth, and often generate fear when facing strange matters. These fears cannot be promptly guided and resolved by their parents, forcing them to bury this fear in their hearts, so that when encountering similar matters later, the fear deepens even further, and psychological problems gradually take root in the hearts of left-behind children.

4.6. The absence of social supervision

At the present stage, the general public holds relatively strong exclusionary attitudes toward migrant workers and left-behind children. It is commonly believed that migrant workers have caused urban areas to become dirty, chaotic, and poor, and even the rising urban crime rate is attributed to migrant workers who have entered cities for work. In recent years, although the Party Central Committee has continuously increased fiscal investment to improve the living environment of rural left-behind children, the psychological problems of left-behind children remain severely prevalent, urgently requiring attention and improvement.

5. Social work interventions for the mental health of rural left-behind children

5.1. The general principles and procedures

The causes of mental health problems among rural left-behind children mainly stem from the failure to satisfy their living and psychological needs. Therefore, society must employ various means to meet the reasonable needs of left-behind children—particularly their psychological needs. The ultimate goal of social work intervention in the psychological problems of rural left-behind children is to help them restore self-confidence, emerge from psychological shadows, and face the details of life with a positive and

upward-looking attitude. In concrete work, case work and group work methods can be applied to conduct comprehensive research and analysis of left-behind children's psychological problems, thereby identifying which intervention method can achieve the most ideal resolution effect under which circumstances. When social workers intervene in the psychological problems of left-behind children, the process consists of seven components: application, case opening, data collection, assessment, service plan formulation, plan implementation and execution, and case closure and evaluation. When involving client acceptance, social workers must fully consider the personal circumstances of left-behind children, allowing them to make their own choices and decisions. Social workers must adhere to the principle of helping others to help themselves, consistently maintaining compassion and patience to resolve problems together with those being helped. Meanwhile, social workers can communicate and negotiate with left-behind children through various channels and resources, and through efforts form an interactive model of social worker-family-school-community, providing strong support and guarantee for resolving the psychological problems of left-behind children.

5.2. Role orientation and professional requirements

Second, when employing group work methods to intervene in the psychological problems of left-behind children, social workers should fully consider the thoughts of every left-behind child in the group, and fully tap into the potential and strengths of each left-behind child. Moreover, they should better handle their activity role within the group; social workers cannot make decisions on behalf of left-behind children, but rather serve merely as facilitators. Social workers should maintain a caring attitude, possess patience, and be able to perceive the mental states of left-behind children. Achieving these elements constitutes a good beginning for social work to bring effective help to left-behind children.

6. Conclusion

This study takes 40 left-behind children in Hu jia Zhuang Village as research subjects, and conducts an empirical investigation using the Mental Health Test (MHT) for adolescents. It systematically reveals the current status, causes, and social work intervention pathways of mental health problems among rural left-behind children. The research finds that left-behind children in this village commonly suffer from relatively severe psychological problems including loneliness tendency, learning anxiety, interpersonal anxiety, self-blame tendency, and physical symptoms. Their causes are the result of the interplay of multi-dimensional factors: the absence of family affection constitutes the core inducing factor; parental cognitive bias and lack of parenting exacerbate psychological developmental lag; the school-oriented examination system and imbalance of teacher attention create secondary harm; insufficient learning ability and introverted, withdrawn personalities produce a vicious cycle; and the absence of social supervision and prejudicial discrimination further deteriorate their growth environment. The article finally proposes that social work intervention should adhere to the principle of "helping others to help themselves," comprehensively employ case work and group work methods, and construct a "social worker-family-school-community" four-in-one interactive model. Through needs assessment, resource linkage, Potential Development, and continuous follow-up, it helps left-behind children restore self-confidence, emerge from psychological shadows, and achieve positive and healthy development. This study provides empirical evidence and practical reference for localized intervention in the mental health problems of rural left-behind children, while also reflecting that under the background of rapid urbanization, improving the care service system for left-behind children, strengthening family guardianship responsibilities, optimizing the mental health education functions of schools, and creating an inclusive and friendly social environment remain important social issues urgently needing resolution.

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