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Girls left behind by migrant parents at risks of mental harms

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PSYCHOLOGY

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FILE

Left-behind girls in China's countryside are often subject to emotional and psychological problems due to lack of parental support.

In recent years, social scientists have turned their attention to the plight of China's young girls in the countryside, who are left behind with grandparents while their parents seek economic opportunity in the city.

Crime victims

Girls are the most common victims of a majority of crimes against youth in China, such as child trafficking, neglect, abuse, campus and family violence, and others, according to studies like the Girls Protection Research Report released by China Children and Teenager's Fund in September 2013.

So, why are girls so often the targets of these crimes? Several reasons are given in the report, including the lack of adequate supervision, insufficient knowledge of safety, and social inequality, which leads to a lack of respect for girls, a group that is potentially the most vulnerable. Although physical injury does occur, psychological harm tends to be more common, including emotional, behavioral, learning disorders and other mental health problems.

Children left behind by their parents are often subjected to emotional neglect, a lack of family education and ineffective supervision. Girls from rural areas who are about to enter or have already entered puberty must become self-reliant given the lack of parental support. Without the ability to discern right and wrong, they can be misled.

Because there is still a common preference for boys over girls in rural areas, parents often take boys with them when migrating, while they leave the girls at home to be cared for by the elderly and other relatives.

Alone at home, girls may feel discarded and lack a concept of self-worth. Confined by traditional con-

cepts, some girls are timid and overly cautious, making them less inclined to voice their psychological distress. Over time, childhood autism might be the result.

Migrant girls also account for a large proportion of at-risk girls. Living together with parents who migrate from rural areas to cities, these children live in precarious housing situations with relatively poor sanitary conditions. Moreover, they may also have problems in learning adaptability because of discrepancies in teaching schedules and modes.

Comparative studies

Based on the aforementioned problems, we are trying to understand the difference between left-behind children and those in conventional nuclear families, migrants and city-born children, as well as boys and girls in their psychological activities and social adaptability.

We formed a sample of 4,562 students from grades three through seven in seven different elementary and secondary schools. Among those, 3,240, or 71 percent of the total, were children whose parents work in their hometown, and 1,315, or 29 percent of the total, were left-behind children.

At the same time, we also took a sample of 1,173 students from grades three through six, including 505 migrant children. Boys and girls each accounted for approximately half of this sample. The data comes from the self-reported accounts of children as well as peer and teacher assessment, and also surveys of the parents. The following are the results of the investigation.

Generally speaking, girls are more likely to be haunted by internalized negative emotions such as a sense of loneliness, depression, nervous-

ness and anxiety. On the other hand, they are less likely to be involved in rule violation, hyperactivity and aggressive behaviors. As we observed, left-behind girls more often resort to externalizing behaviors, such as quarrels and fights, compared with other groups of subjects.

Moreover, sense of loneliness is more manifest among migrant girls than city-born ones but is less obvious among those who live with or are left alone by their parents in their hometowns.

In addition, migrant girls, similar to their urban peers, are more likely to suffer from depression than the latter two groups. In other words, in terms of psychological adaptation, migrant girls are less capable than their city-born girls but more competent than the left-behind girls and girls living with their parents in rural areas. The constant bombardment of the psyche with negative emotions may be detrimental to children's mental health.

Second, our study shows that girls scored higher in scales of social anxiety, sensitivity to negative interpersonal feedback and social avoidance. Social avoidance is manifested as extreme awkwardness and nervousness when meeting strangers. To be specific, city-born girls are less likely to suffer from the aforementioned psychological disorders compared to migrant ones. However, girls who are left alone or stay with their parents in their hometown are more likely to be affected.

Furthermore, active parenting means that children are guided with patience, affection and rational counsel by their closest family members. On the other hand, passive parenting means that children are afflicted by deliberate negligence, rejections, verbal or physical abuse, and

stringent controls in the course of their upbringing.

Maternal love

Based on the preliminary results of our investigation, there are several recommendations for ways to improve the childhood and adolescence of girls who are more or less neglected by their parents.

First of all, schools should provide those girls with guidance on life matters and psychological health. Compared with the opposite gender, girls are more likely to be distressed during adolescence. Therefore, teachers need to pay extra attention to their psychological adaptability. Each school should have at least one mental health counselor specializing in psychological consultation and detection of emotional and behavioral problems that children may encounter. Mental health education can be carried out through group coaching or peer interactions so that girls who share similar backgrounds can come together to learn about emotion regulation techniques, patterns of physiological and mental development as well as coping skills.

Second, schools should provide parents with instruction on family education. More often than not, parents are preoccupied with grades yet know few things, if any, about their children's social adaptability, daily concerns and youth problems at large.

Moreover, psychological adaption is particularly difficult for migrant and left-behind girls. They have to deal with prejudice, discrimination and identity crisis at school as well as "growing pains" caused by physiological changes. No one other than their parents can render assistance to them in a prompt and proper manner. Therefore, schools and other related organizations should

help parents perform their duty as caregivers by encouraging them to think about what they have neglected before while learning about how family atmosphere, living conditions, parenthood and different modes of upbringing may affect the wellbeing of their children.

Finally, we should pay extra attention to issues concerning statutory and temporary guardians. Based on our study, girls who are separated from their mother are more likely to experience a sense of loneliness, depression, bullying and learning difficulties regardless of whether their father is around.

At least, this demonstrates that maternal love is particularly important to girls. Their dietary needs and sense of security are tied to their mother's presence. As they grow up, girls have to go through considerable physiological changes, meaning that they need guidance from their mother who had gone through the same process before.

Moreover, without observing and learning from their mother's tones and manners, they may have troubles in developing and adapting their social roles. They might experience panic and anxiety if their mother is not around. Yet the negative impact of maternal absence can be more or less remedied if those left-behind girls are fortunate enough to have at least one mature female who they can have an in-depth conversation with every week as a companion and temporary guardian. Such communication will facilitate active guidance on girls' learning capacity, words and deeds, enabling a smooth and happy transition to adulthood.

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