

# The Current Situation of Parent-child Psychological Abuse in China —Taking Middle School Students in Shenzhen for Example

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**Abstract.** Parent-child psychological abuse refers to the psychological abuse between parents and children. With the improvement of people's education and the change of lifestyle, compared with physical abuse, the appearance of parent-child psychological abuse in the family is more common. The middle school students are in adolescence, and their physiology and psychology have undergone tremendous changes in this stage. Parent-child psychological abuse is a hidden form of language attack, which will cause great harm to the mental health and personality development of adolescents. In this study, the current situation of adolescent under parent-child psychological abuse and its specific impact on adolescents were investigated. The questionnaire survey was conducted to investigate the current parent-child psychological abuse situation of 75 students in Shenzhen secondary school and the influence on adolescents themselves. It was found that the existence of parent-child psychological abuse is very common, and 40% of the adolescents have been subjected to parent-child psychological abuse, and the circumstances are serious. Moreover, parent-child psychological abuse has a negative impact on adolescents, which tends to cause negative emotions, reduces the efficiency of learning, and seriously affects the formation of personalities of adolescents, making adolescents more introverted and negative.

## 1. Introduction

The World Health Organization defined the word “violence” in 1999: “violence” is the deliberate use of physical strength or privilege to attack or harm oneself, another person or group of people or society; disrupt social order; cause or is likely to cause injury, death, mental loss, developmental disorders or deprivation of rights (Xuemei Xia, 2017). A common form of violence is physical violence, which is the physical injury and physical damage caused by beatings or physical attack. In spite of this, psychological abuse is another manifestation of violence. Unlike physical violence, psychological abuse is a form of mental abuse (Haifang Wang, 2013). Mental abuse is a compulsory or aversive act that causes mental harm or threat to others. Contrary to physical abuse, these coercive actions are not directed at the physical integrity of the subject, but rather on the recipient's self-awareness (Murphy & Cascardi, 1999). Mental abuse often weakens the self-esteem and mental health of others (O'Leary, 1999). In this study, psychological abuse refers to communication through the language of taunting, insulting, demeaning, blaming or the attitudes of indifference, hostility, and indifference, thus damaging the psychology and spirit of the other, and having serious psychological impacts on the recipient. Psychological abuse is a relatively new topic. Although the current research content is limited, it has attracted the attention of a large number of researchers. The current research directions include family psychological abuse, education psychological abuse, campus psychological abuse and workplace psychological abuse (Xuemei Xia, 2017).

There is no clear definition of domestic psychological abuse in Chinese legislative and theory. In practice, it refers to the fact that when family members have conflicts, they are maliciously slandered, satirized, indifferent, insulted and intimidated to other by non-physical violence. And it manifested as indifference to the other, no language exchange, etc. Then it causes people in the state of mental torture. Zhang pointed out that unlike domestic violence, the manifestations and implementation methods of family psychological abuse are more concealed and long-term, and their manifestations

are diverse. Different memberships in family can lead to different ways of family psychological abuse (Yijie Zhang, 2014). In general, psychological abuse in the family always refers to psychological abuse between husband and wife, and most of the current research on family psychological abuse focuses on psychological abuse between husband and wife.

The causes of psychological abuse in the family are very complicated, including historical factors, for example, the traditional male superiority has affected male violence against women. At the same time, under the impact of traditional culture and modern legal system, domestic violence has changed into a more subtle form: mental abuse. For some economic factors, due to the different income between husband and wife, the family power dispute between husband and wife; for cultural factors, as the people's education level increases, couples will turn physical violence into indifference or alienation as psychological abuse when dealing with contradictions. These factors all have led to the emergence of psychological abuse in the family. The mental damage caused by psychological abuse in the family is more serious than that caused by physical violence. The victim's personality is insulted and psychological abuse produces emotions such as anxiety, depression, helplessness and fear, which affect people's daily life. Living in this relationship in a long-term can lead to psychological depression or mental breakdown, and distorted relationship between husband and wife. Most couples choose to divorce, some even choose to go the extreme outcomes (Yijie Zhang, 2014).

At the same time, psychological abuse between parents can very negative impacts on the growth of minor children. In Margolin and Gordis's research, according to family system theory, when anger, unhappiness, or restless negative emotions, facial or behavioral expressions appear in a family relationship, this expression can be transmitted to other family relationships other than husband and wife (Margolin & Gordis, 2003). Compared with the situation of no family psychological abuse, children with family psychological abuse are at greater risk of physical abuse, and in the case of husband's psychological abuse against the wife, the negative impact on children is 5.29 times of those lack of family psychological abuse (Chang, Theodore, Martin & Runyan, 2008). Children living in family psychological abuse are always unsociable, indifferent, anxious, self-enclosed, and difficult to communicate with others. Even more, there may appear some characteristics like anti-family and anti-social. Once specific factors are involved, it is very likely that such teenagers will be triggered to commit crimes (Chunlin Wang & Jiawen You, 2017).

Parent-child psychological abuse refers specifically to psychological abuse between parents and children. There is rarely specific research on this kind of psychological abuse. Most researches focus on psychological abuse between husband and wife or the mental abuse to children from parents. In current research, parent-child psychological abuse refers to the phenomenon of psychological abuse between parents and children, which is aimed at the psychological and spiritual destruction and confrontation between the two sides, through language of taunting, insulting, demeaning, blaming or the attitudes of indifference, hostility, and indifference ways to communicate. It has serious psychological and spiritual violations and injuries to both sides. The causes of parent-child psychological abuse are similar to those of family psychological abuse: the inequality in family status, the high level of education in the two sides, the poor communication, and the improper education concept of parents have led to the excessive interference of parents and the resistance of children, which may lead to the generation of psychological abuse (Yanshan Huang, 2013, Zhuangmin Xu, 2017, Chunlin Wang & Jiawen You, 2017). From the study of parents' mental abuse of children, it seems that children will have emotional problems after psychological abuse and will have misperceptions of dysfunction. the dysfunction makes children believed that abuse is deserved and their parents are trustworthy (Briere, 1992), which is not conducive to the development of children's physical and mental health. McGee and Mullen found that adults with a history of mental abuse during childhood are more likely to experience mental problems in later life than those who have experienced other forms of child abuse during childhood (McGee et al., 1997; Mullen et al., 1996).

Nowadays, with the improvement of people's education level and the changes of lifestyle, the occurrence of parent-child psychological abuse in the family is becoming more and more common. The children in middle school are in adolescence, and the physiology and psychology have undergone tremendous changes during this period, making the relationship between parents and children often

crises. Parent-child psychological abuse appears with a covert form of language attack, which will cause great harm to adolescents' mental health and personality development. Therefore, the psychological abuse between parents and children needs the society's attention, but the related research is still insufficient. In order to promote the recognition of this new type of violence, the current study examines the current situation of psychological abuse in Chinese urban youths and its impact on adolescents. We used questionnaire to investigate the current situation of adolescent parent-child psychological abuse and its specific impact on adolescents. At the same time, this research enriches the results of research on parent-child psychological abuse.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1 Participants**

In this study, 75 middle school students aged between 13 and 17 were surveyed, and 75 questionnaires were distributed. 74 valid questionnaires were received, and the effective recovery rate was 98.7%.

### **2.2 Measurement tools**

This study adopted a self-made questionnaire for research and investigation. The questionnaire is divided into two parts: The first part explores the current situation of parent-child psychological abuse among Shenzhen Middle School students, while the second part explores the impact of parent-child psychological abuse on middle school students. Parent-child psychological abuse includes four manifestations, which are insult, demeaning, neglect and hostility. Therefore, in the questionnaire, the first part of the test questions tests the degree of similarity between parents' behaviors and the performance of each behavior mentioned in the questionnaire (from 1 to 10, counted by 10 points score, 0 is the least similar to the actual situation, 10 is the most consistent with the actual situation) and subjectively the frequency of occurrence of this performance mode (from 1 to 10, counted by 10 points score, 0 is almost non-occurring, 10 means this happens lots of time).

The second part of the questionnaire studies the effects of parent-child psychological abuse on the emotional experience of the participants, including sadness, anger, loneliness, helplessness, anxiety, happiness and happiness, and explores whether teenagers will develop these emotions under the parent-child psychological abuse. In addition, the second part also investigates the impact of parent-child psychological abuse on middle school students' study efficiency, attitude towards things, self-esteem and personality shaping. In terms of study efficiency, -9 means there is a great decline in study efficiency, 0 is not affected, 9 means there is a great improvement in study efficiency; in terms of attitude towards things, -9 means becoming extremely pessimistic, 0 is unaffected, 9 is becoming extremely optimistic; in terms of self-esteem, -9 is extremely inferior, 0 is unaffected, 9 is extremely self-respecting; in character shaping, -9 is becoming extremely introverted, 0 is unaffected, 9 is becoming extremely extroverted.

### **2.3 Measurement methods**

This research uses an online questionnaire, which is written and distributed through Wenjuanxing, the questionnaire website ([www.wjx.cn](http://www.wjx.cn)), then promoted it in WeChat group. The source of the subject is limited to the Shenzhen Middle School student by investigating the grade and class of participants in the questionnaire. Finally, use Wenjuanxing to record the questionnaire responses of each subject and collect all the data.

### **2.4 Data Statistics Method**

This research uses SPSS 22.0 for data analysis, and uses the descriptive statistical analysis such as mean and ratio to analyze the existence of parent-child psychological abuse among adolescents and its impact on their emotions. The t-test was used to compare the scores of study efficiency, attitude, self-esteem and personality dimension between the parent-child psychological abuse group and the non-parent-child psychological abuse group, to find whether there was a significant difference between the two groups.

### 3. Results

In this study, subjects with a degree of 5 or more were divided into parent-child psychological abuse victims. The results showed that among the 74 subjects, the number of people who suffered from parent-child psychological abuse was 30, accounting for 40.5% of the total. Among these victims, there are 15 people, 45.5% of the total, who have suffered verbal insults in parent-child psychological abuse. 17 people, 51.5% of the total number of victims, who have been degraded as a form of parent-child psychological abuse. There were 15 people who experienced neglect from their parents, accounting for 45.5% of the total number. There were 8 people, 24.2% of the total, who suffered hostility from parents. Among the 30 subjects who suffered from parent-child psychological abuse, there were 16 people suffered in one form of parent-child psychological abuse, 4 in the two forms, 9 in the three forms, and 1 in the four forms. From the frequency of parent-child psychological abuse, the average score of subjects who suffered from verbal insults was 7.3, the average score of subjects who suffered being degraded was 7.6, the average score of subjects who suffered neglect was 6.3, and the average score of subjects who were treated with hostility was 6.5.

Regarding the impact of parent-child psychological abuse on emotions, there are 45 people who felt sad, accounting for 60.8% of the total number, 50 people who felt angry, accounting for 67.6% of the total number, and 33 people who felt lonely, accounting for 44.6% of the total number, 35 people who felt helpless, accounting for 47.3% of the total number, and 37 people who felt anxious, accounting for 50% of the total number. There are 4 people who felt joyful, 5.4% of the total number, and 3 people who felt happy, accounting for 4.1% of the total number.

Among the 30 people who suffered from psychological abuse from their parents, 25 people were saddened, accounting for 83.3% of the total number of victims. 28 people were angry, accounting for 93.3% of the total number. 22 people felt lonely, accounting for 73.3% of the total number of victims. 32 people felt helpless, accounting for 66.7% of the total. 20 people felt anxious, accounting for 66.7% of the total. And there are 2 people who felt joyful, 6.7% of the total number of the victims, and 2 people who felt happy, accounting for 6.7% of the total.

The questionnaire surveyed the adolescents who whether were subjected to parent-child psychological abuse in terms of study efficiency, attitude towards things, self-esteem and personality shaping. Then conducted an independent sample t-test on the scores. The results showed that There was no significant difference between the teenagers who were suffered from parent-child psychological abuse and those were not in the term of self-esteem ( $p > 0.05$ ). However, there was a significant difference in the study efficiency, attitudes toward attitudes, and personality shaping ( $p < 0.05$ ). Compared with adolescents who have not been subjected to parent-child psychological abuse, the decline in learning efficiency of teenagers who are subject to parent-child psychological abuse is more significant, the way of dealing with things is more negative, and their personality is more introverted.

Table 1 Comparison of differences in study efficiency, attitude towards things, self-esteem and personality shaping among adolescents who whether were subjected to parent-child psychological abuse (n=74)

	Suffered parent-child psychological abuse (n=30)	No parent-child psychological abuse(n=44)	t	p
Study Efficiency	-3.27±4.08	-1.23±3.06	-2.456	0.016
Attitude Towards Things	-3.00±3.87	-0.89±3.27	-2.547	0.013
Self-esteem	-3.10±4.07	-0.50±3.45	-2.865	0.006
Personality Shaping	-1.53±4.15	-0.86±3.53	-0.745	0.458

Among all the subjects, there were 55 people who think parent-child psychological abuse causes depression, accounted for 74.3% of the total number. There were 26 people who had suicidal thoughts after enduring parent-child psychological abuse behaviors, accounting for 35.1% of the total number

of people. There are 32 people who believe that parent-child psychological abuse increase violence tendency, accounting for 43.2% of the total number. Among the 30 people who suffered from parent-child psychological abuse, there were 26 people who think parent-child psychological abuse causes depression, accounted for 86.7% of the total number of victims. There were 18 people who had suicidal thoughts after enduring parent-child psychological abuse behaviors, accounting for 60% of the total number of victims. There are 18 people who believe that parent-child psychological abuse increase violence tendency, accounting for 60% of the total number of victims.

#### **4. Discussion**

Parent-child psychological abuse is an action of hurting others in the spiritual layer. Its manifestations are diverse, and it often uses language and attitude as mediation. In Wang Haifang's research, at present, 42% of the total number of minors who are "sometimes" subjected to parent-child psychological abuse, and 29% of minors who "often" suffer from parent-child psychological abuse. A total of 92% of minors have experienced parent-child psychological abuse (Haifang Wang, 2013). However, the age of this study is not clearly defined. It is defined as a study of minors, but only surveys of minors of primary school age in the practice. And the language of the questionnaire is too abstract, it may be difficult for the minors at the age of primary school to understand and then have an impact on the outcome. The current study defined the age in adolescents (13-17 years old) and used simple, non-conceptual language to describe the problem in the questionnaire. And then concretize the behavior of parent-child psychological abuse while quantifying psychological abuse from frequency and degree in both aspects. In this study, according to the data collected by the questionnaire, the number of people who suffered from parent-child psychological abuse accounted for a large proportion of the total number of subjects. There is about 40% of them suffered from parent-child psychological abuse. The forms of psychological abuse suffered by the victims are mostly verbal insults, derogatory and neglect. The situation of psychological abuse is badly serious. Nearly half of the victims have suffered from parent-child psychological abuse in two or more manifestations.

Zhang (2014) found that psychological abuse in the family can cause anxiety, depression, helplessness, fear and other emotions. It can also be seen from the data analysis of the study that parent-child psychological abuse as a kind of psychological abuse in the family, its behavior has negative impacts on the emotions of the person being imposed. Most of the subjects have experienced sadness and loneliness after suffering psychological abuse, as well as emotions such as "anger" that may lead to negative consequences such as aggressive behavior. Under psychological abuse environment, children's study will be greatly affected. At the same time, psychological abuse will affect the healthy growth of minors. Most of the minors who grow up under psychological abuse are quirky, negative, inferior, and even self-enclosed, and then do not believe in others (Yijie Zhang, 2014). In the current study, the questionnaire surveyed the participants' self-evaluation of the deep influence of parent-child psychological abuse on themselves. The result shows that parent-child psychological abuse has a more negative impact on adolescents' study efficiency, attitudes toward things and personality shaping. There are significant differences between teenagers who are subject to psychological abuse by their parents and those who are not. Adolescents suffering from psychological abuse often show traits of pessimism, introversion, and inferiority. Zhou argued that there is a positive correlation between self-esteem and interpersonal relationships in the study of the relationship among college students' coping stances, self-esteem and interpersonal relationship (Ming Zhou, 2013). However, in our study, it was not found that subjects who were subjected to parent-child psychological abuse had significant differences between those who did not in their scores on self-esteem. This may be due to the age difference between the subjects and the number of participants.

Huang believes that the implementation of family psychological abuse will lead children to have the feeling of loneliness, depression and lack of emotion. It also causes inferiority, reduces self-confidence, and affects their normal learning. In this study, about 75% of participants believe that parent-child psychological abuse can lead to depression, and more than 80% of those who suffer from psychological abuse believe that psychological abuse can lead to depression. In this study, 60% of

the subjects who suffered from parent-child psychological abuse had the idea of committing suicide. Meanwhile, this proves the conclusion built by Norman (2012) that there is a causal relationship between child abuse and a series of mental disorders, drug use, and suicide attempts. Wang and You (2017) believe that adolescents who are subjected to psychological abuse are more rebellious and vulnerable to violent crimes, property crimes and drug crimes. Among them, violent crimes mainly focus on intentional injury, gathering crimes, and finding troubles. At the same time, statistics show that most of teenagers with criminal records leave home because of psychological abuse in their families and parental violence and coldness, and even be tempted to start committing crimes (Yijie Zhang, 2014). Similarly, in this study, about 45% of the subjects believed that parent-child psychological abuse will lead to violent behavior, and for those who were subjected to parent-child psychological abuse, the proportion rose to 60%.

In general, the current study found that parent-child psychological abuse is very common among Chinese adolescents and their parents. The proportion of adolescents who suffer parent-child psychological abuse is relatively large, and the current situation is serious. More than half of victims have received more than two forms of parent-child psychological abuse. These bring extremely serious harm to adolescents. At a shallow level, it will bring negative emotions and lead to a decline in the efficiency of studying among adolescents. From a deeper level, parent-child psychological abuse has a serious impact on the formation of adolescents' personality. Compared with those who have not been subjected to parent-child psychological abuse, teenagers who suffer will form a more negative, negative, pessimistic, violent personality, and will increase the possibility of depression, even the idea of suicide.

## **5. Implication**

The current research conducts research and exploration in accordance with the scientific research process, and tries to estimate and reduce errors in all aspects as much as possible, but there are still some shortcomings in this study. First of all, the research topic of this study is the study of the recent situation and impacts of parent-child psychological abuse. However, in the choice of subjects, only one side of the adolescent (child) is regarded as the recipient of psychological abuse, and conducted a questionnaire survey. It did not include the psychological abuse on the parents by their children as part of the study. However, psychological abuse is a form of communication between people. Only one party in the communication without the other party cannot fully reflect the pattern of parent-child psychological abuse, and it is not conducive to explore deeper causes and make treatment. At the same time, this study has limitations on the location and sample size. The location range is small while the sample size is small. It is not representative enough in the keywords of teenagers. Expanding the scope of investigation may lead to different research results, and small sample size caused the sample to be incapable of reflecting the diversity of the sample. In addition, this study only focuses on the recent situation and impacts of parent-child psychological abuse, but does not explore deeper areas, such as the reasons for the formation of parent-child psychological abuse.

With the development of society and the improvement of living conditions, people began to pay attention to the communication among them and the spirit association, and the relationship between parents and children has become an important topic. Nowadays, research on parent-child relationship has reached a certain scale and has acquired considerable gains. However, there still lacks deeper research and investigation the branch of parent-child relationship in parent-child psychological abuse. It is hoped that the subsequent research can focus on the field of parent-child psychological abuse, conduct deeper explorations on its causes and treatment methods, and expand in the scope of the site and improve the sample diversity.

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