

What is Happening with His Behavior? A Case Study of Problem Behavior and Family Function from Little "A"

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ABSTRACT

Behavioral problems in children appear in various forms, such as internalizing and externalizing problems which can affect parenting and family functioning. Family function is one of the causes as well as the solution in externalizing problem behavior. Untreated externalizing behaviors are associated with a wide range of negative outcomes for children and adolescents where boys tend to have a higher externalizing problem than girls. This study aims to describe the condition of children with certain problem behavior and describe the family function in a child with externalizing problem behavior and the ways to overcome the behaviors. This is case-study research, with observation and interview methods conducted to the subject "A" and the subject's mother. The results of this study indicate that "A" has several behavioral problems such as hyperactivity, inattention, problems in communication skills as well as in writing skills which appear in externalizing problems. In general, the functioning of family A in overcoming behavioral problems is still not optimal and lack of its cohesiveness, flexibility, and communication. Suggestions are given to improve family functioning in overcoming behavioral problems in children because the function of the family is very important in the development of personality and character formation.

Keywords: *problem behavior, externalizing problems, family function*

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, behavioral problems in children are one of the most common problems in children. Ghandour, Sherman, Vladutiu, Ali, Lynch, Bitsko, & Blumberg [1] explain that based on nationally representative data obtained from NSCH (National Survey of Children's Health) depression, anxiety, and conduct problems are a problem that often occurs in children. In the research proposed by Liu et al. [2], the prevalence of problem behavior in school-age children in China varied from 4.7% to 10% during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has to be noted that problem behavior in children is not only focused on children who have been diagnosed by professionals but it is also important for us to identify problem behaviors in children as early as possible. According to O'Connell, Boat, & Warner [3] emotional and behavioral problems in children can be explained as a sign or symptom that does not meet the criteria for mental disorders but has the potential to cause disturbances if not handled properly. Behaviors with negative effects that are often signs or symptoms of mental, emotional, or behavioral disorders that may not be frequent or severe enough to meet the criteria for a diagnosis. This has become a special concern, especially for people in Indonesia who lack mental health awareness and still consider mental disorders as a taboo or a disgrace for the family [4].

Behavioral problems consist of two categories, which are externalizing problems and internalizing problems.

Achenbach [5] explains that the terms of externalizing and internalizing problems were introduced in 1966. Externalizing problems are problems or disorders that are focusing on the behavioral (such as, conduct disorder or oppositional defiant disorder, hyperactivity) while internalizing problems are problems or disorders that are focusing on the emotional (such as anxiety and depression) [3]. McMahon, Wells, & Kohler [6] explain that untreated externalizing behaviors are related with negative outcomes for children and adolescents based on the early model of externalizing behavior that may persist into adulthood with problems of substance abuse, unstable employment and relationship difficulties. Not only that but externalizing problems also have an impact on the low academic results of children. Whereas boys tend to have higher externalizing problems scores than girls [7].

Externalizing and internalizing behaviors related to an increased levels of stressful events [8]. This stressful event can be caused by a subsystem of family that being disturbed and can led to an increase emotional response, such as when educating children [9].

Identification, assessment, and treatment of children with externalizing problems and learning disabilities are critical in optimizing the development and prevention of behavioral and emotional problems in adulthood [10]. One

thing that can be done to identify children's problem behavior is through the role of their family. Macana & Comim [11] suggested that the family has an important role in providing a risk or prevention or even protection to the family dynamic in a structurally and internally way on child development. This explains that behavioral problems that occur in children can arise from the adaptive difficulties experienced by the family itself [11]. This is also in line with the study proposed by Tandiono, Soetikno, & Dewi [12] that explain families with children who are victims of bullying should be able to control communication and flexibility (dimensions of family function) between family members and to reduce psychological problems such as suicide ideation experienced as a result of bullying. It means that it's important for us to explore more about how the family function in children who have behavioral problems.

Family function theory from Circumplex model is a theory that explain the family dynamics comprehensively in its three aspect, cohesion, flexibility, and communication [13]. Researchers suggest that the identification of behavioral problems in children is needed as early as possible to be able to find out the most appropriate form of intervention to minimize several risk factors during their development [9]. In addition, this research aim to describe the condition of children with certain problem behavior and describe the family function in a child with externalizing problem behavior and the ways to overcome the behaviors.

2. METHODS

2.1. Participants

Observations and interviews were conducted on participant name "A". Subject "A", a 9-year-old boy, currently in 3rd grade. He is the first child and he has a little sister. He lives with both of his parents, his grandmother and housekeeper. The estimation of socio-economic status of A's family is upper-middle class because both of his parents are working and he also took some extra courses, which is math courses, swimming courses and lesson courses. The interview was also conducted with A's mother to obtain more comprehensive data.

2.2. Research Tools

The assessment was carried out using observation and interview methods. The tools and equipment needed for the assessment are a recorder to record the interview process, paper, and pens to make notes about the results of observations and interviews. Video was also obtained from the subject's mother.

2.3. Research Procedure

This research design is qualitative research. Observations and interviews were conducted at A's (subject's) home. At first, the subject were asked to fill in brief personal data on a piece of paper, and then observations and interviews were conducted. During the assessment, the researcher then observed the behavior of the subject and write down the observations and interview results. The information was then obtained through interviews conducted with the subject's mother. The information is also taken from A's mother by interview.

3. RESULTS

A is a 9-year-old boy who is in 3rd grade. He is the eldest of 2 siblings who lives with his parents, sister, grandmother, and housekeeper. Subject shows some behavioral problems during the interview and the behaviors were also described as behavior that happens every day.

The behavioral problem shown by A is that during the interview, he tends not to focus on the questions from the interviewer. This is shown when he is being asked by the interviewer, he doesn't pay attention and asks the question again. During the interview, A also often played with his feet until his feet hit the bottom of the sofa, played with the pillow beside him, and covered his face with the pillow. When being asked, he is also often seen not listening to the interviewer. This shows where his head tends to often face the other way and his eyes are not facing the interviewer. He also seems easily distracted by foreign stimuli around him. In this case, A seems to often ask questions related to surrounding objects such as the stone in the cupboard where he sits. He also seemed to talk about other things that were not related to the interviewer's question, such as when asked about who is his favourite family member he then answered it with a country name. Other than that, A seemed busy playing with a pillow while likening the object to something foreign while sitting on the pillow in the interview session.

This is also supported by his mother's statement that A is often easily distracted by foreign stimuli in his daily life which is being easily distracted by objects around him, such as a pencil. A also often doesn't even remember his own things, which eventually makes his mother always buy pencils and erasers every 2 weeks because he doesn't remember where his writing tools or books are.

A also shows hyperactive behaviors. This can be seen from the results of observations and interviews that lasted for about one hour where A seems unable to sit still on the sofa where he used to sit at the beginning of the interview. He also tends to often climb another chair, run from one sofa to another, move towards the aquarium in the living room, move his legs and arms and leaves the living room twice which is to the stairs and to his mother's room while his feet pounded the floor. During the interview, he also demonstrated things like running and then accidentally

dropped himself during the interview. Not only he couldn't be quiet during the interview but he also seemed to want to finish the interview session immediately. This could be seen from A, whom several times asked when the interview would end. His mother also explained that he seemed to show behavior that was always in an active state. This was explained by his mother in the interview who explained that he once felt like there was a machine in his body. It also explains by how he sometimes interrupts conversations during interviews and he sometimes feels that he has to tell what's on his mind right away in everyday life. When this happened, A's mom tend to listen what A wants to talk.

A also shows behavior that difficult to manage, for instance, he did not listen when his mother telling him something. Based on his mother's report, sometimes his mother tends to let him lying down in the floor but sometimes his mother discipline him by shouting at him. This is one of an example of family function which is flexibility aspect.

A also tends to have difficulty in queuing. This is shown by his experience when he queued at a restaurant and he suddenly left the queue because he felt it was too long. This is also confirmed by a statement from his mother where at that time A left the queue because he was tired. A also seems to often talk excessively. This is seen when he is being asked about how many tasks he tends to work on and he talks about something else. He also often answers or speaks before the question is being asked completely. This is a symptom of hyperactivity-impulsivity, which is often interrupting or disturbing others.

A's behavior has occurred since he enters the playgroup. At that time, his mother received a report that he had not been able to sit still and climbed the existing trellis while at that time his friends were able to sit quietly. The characteristic of hyperactivity is also shown by him, which is an immediate desire to get an award or reward in the interview session. His desire to finish up the interview shows by him asking when will the interview end.

Based on A's daily video, he seemed to be woken up by his parents in the morning, which is his mother. When he woke up, he seemed to wake up. It shows that he kept his eyes closed and shifted his position from bed to his mother's lap. Not only in the morning, but at bedtime, he also seems difficult to sleep. This is shown where he still playing with his younger sister, such as playing with his sister while shouting, playing with balloons, and screaming while his body bending towards the bed for no apparent reason. When he did this, his mother asking him asking him to sleep, but he seemed to ignore and did not respond to his mother. Based on the video, he also seemed to move her feet several times and turn his eyes around him then moved his cellphone from sofa to the table during online schools or PJJ (Pembelajaran Jarak Jauh).

A, who is currently in grade 3 of elementary school often gets reports from his teachers that his writing cannot be read. This can also be seen from the personal data that A filled in before the interview, where A's writing seemed disproportionate and skewed. During the interview, A was seen speaking haltingly and keep repeating words using

mixed Indonesian and English. He seems difficult to say what he wants to express and this can be seen from him who speaks stammered and can't arrange the word order properly. Moreover, he also tries to express what he thinks with the help of his body movements.

A also told his mother that he did not want to play with certain children without telling him the reason. He has close friends who usually communicate with him either through online games or sometimes face to face. He has friends, especially when he plays games and takes a swimming course. However, he seems difficult to communicate with his friends sometimes. This is shown when he met his friends, he tried to approach them but then he didn't get a good response because they did not understand what he meant. This then made him didn't want to play with certain friends anymore. It means that it is still quite difficult for him to communicate with his friends. He also seems shy when meeting new people, for instance, he tends not to see the new person and is afraid of the person unless he already knows the person.

Based on the dynamic of A's family function, each of the family member has their own function. A has a quite strong attachment with his grandfather who died 2 years ago. A had spent lots of time with him, such as, eating A's favourite food with him, take him to school and home, and also take a walk with him. Based on the interview with A, he explain that one of the closest person to him is his grandfather and he seem about to cry because he worry about his grandfather that already died. Whereas, A's relationship with his grandmother seem close but there still some boundaries because his grandmother sometimes restrict things and tell what A should or should not do.

When A was in kindergarten, he spent lots of his activities with both of his grandfather and grandmother. Both of his parents are working but still seem close with him. Based on his mother's report, A seem more obedient with his mother. This shows when A doing his homework, he tend to wait for his mother and make a deal about doing his homework when his mother was away or not around him.

4. DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the observations and interviews obtained from subjects "A" and his mother, A showed several behavioral problems. Holland, Malmberg, & Peacock [15] suggested that emotional and behavioral problems in children are generally divided into two general categories, which are externalizing problems and internalizing problems. Externalizing problems are outer-directed and involve acting-out, defiant, and non-compliant behaviors. [15].

The behavior of externalizing problems seems to be shown by A. Nikstat & Riemann explain that externalizing problem behavior or (EXT) occurs in interaction with the social environment which is hyperactivity, impulsivity, aggression, deviance [5]. A shows externalizing problem behavior which is hyperactive behavior, a lack of attention, and difficulties in communicating with people

around him. This is in line with what was stated by Srinath [16] who stated that externalizing problems are more common in boys because these behaviors are easier to observe. For example, he seemed unable to sit still and often interrupted the interviewer during the interview. He even felt that the interview which lasted about an hour was too long, so he left the interview room and went to his mother's room. During the interview, A also seemed difficult to explain and arrange the words he wanted to convey, and he delivers it using a mix of English and Indonesian and also using his body movements to explain it. This is in line Petersen & LeBeau with that explain poorer language skills was associated with more externalizing problems [17].

The ability of children in learning two languages does not only seem to be able to increase the positive effect on children's cognitive development, but it also can make bilingual children have lower fluency levels which is a lower vocabulary level compared to children who only learn one language [18]. Not only that but also a lack of language ability predicted relative decreases in social skills, and lack of social skills, in turn, predicted relative increases in externalizing problems [17]. Not only that, but A's mother also often gets reports from the teacher about his writing in his assignment that is difficult to read. This can also be seen from the personal data that he filled in before the interview, where his writing seemed disproportionate and skewed.

Family dysfunction is one of the important factors in predicting the onset of behavioral problems in children and also the continuation of the problems [15]. This also became the focus of the research which is to see how the family function of A's family. Based on the theory proposed by Olson [13], there are three main dimensions in a family system that are described in the Circumplex Model theory: cohesiveness, flexibility, and communication.

Family cohesiveness is explained as the emotional attachment that occurs between family members [13]. In this case, A seems to have an emotional attachment to his grandfather. This is based on the data obtained from A and his mother that before his grandfather died, he spent a lot of time with his grandfather such as eating A's favorite food, taking him from school, and taking him for a walk. Until now, according to the subject, his grandfather is one of the closest people to him. The emotional attachment to his grandfather is shown by A still feels worried about his grandfather who had died and tends to remember and talk about his grandfather when he feels tired. Meanwhile, A's attachment to his grandmother seems close but still has some boundaries where her grandmother has a role to restrict some things that A should and shouldn't do. Thus, cohesiveness in the family is seen by A's closeness to both of his grandparents. However, children who witness death tend to experience fears or worries [14]. Bugge, Darbyshire, Røkholt, Haugstvedt, & Helseth explain that one of the ways to overcome this is by trying to identify the anxiety in the children because the failure in this identification of this emotion can make children avoid painful memories and traumatic experiences that lead to

suppressing their needs, shows aggressive behavior, and tend to withdraw from the environment [19].

The anxiety that A experiences because of the death of a family member which is his grandfather seems to be overcome by the role of his mother. This is shown when A feels tired and tends to talk about his grandfather, his mother then tries to help him overcome his grief by asking him to pray. Not only that, the emotional attachment between A and his mother is seen in him, who tends to communicate and contact his mother more when he needs something.

However, a very high level of cohesion can also cause a problem. This can be seen when subject A is asked to do a task while his mother is working or away, he tends to procrastinate. Whereas when his mother is being around, he willing to do his work and able to do his work quickly. This then become a highlight because it means that A tends to be quite dependent on his mother when doing his work. Yunifer, Soetikno, & Marat [20] explained that the most disturbing and the main problem of school readiness for students in Jakarta is the lack of independence and the tendency of children to depend on others. To deal with this behavior, A's mother tries to overcome the problem by contacting him through cell phone to re-check the tasks that he needs to do when his mother is not around. This kind of action is explained as flexibility which is the other dimension of the circumplex model.

Flexibility in the family according to Olson [13] is explained as the number of changes in leadership, roles in relationships, and rules in relationships. This means every family member tries to balance between stability and changes. This flexible concept is seen in A's family where his mother seems to carry out her role and also adapt to a new situation, such as when his mother is working or not around, his mother tries to contact him so that he still can do his homework at home. The concept of flexibility in A's family also appears during this COVID-19 pandemic. Where in this pandemic period, he seems to be allowed to carry out sports activities, which is swimming lessons. The study by Liu et al. [2] suggested that physical activity could potentially reduce the tendency for symptoms of hyperactivity, inattention, and prosocial problem behavior in children. This concept of flexibility seems to be applied to A's family who provides his activities in order to reduce A's hyperactive and inattentive behavior. Not only that, but A's mother's flexibility also seems to adjust to the hyperactive and inattentive behavior by using a reward and punishment system so that he can complete his tasks.

However, the practice of the consequences done by A's parents and grandmother seems not optimal. This can be seen when A shouting about not accepting the consequences for what he did before and his mother sometimes left him alone but sometimes his mother yells back at him. Not only that but also sometimes A's grandmother used to tweak A if he didn't want to listen to her. So, the way both A's parents and grandmother shows some inconsistency in practicing the rules to him.

Another dimension of the circumplex model is communication. A couple and family communication is seen through the family as a group related to listening

skills (empathy and listening attentively), speaking skills (speaking for one person and not talking to others), self-disclosure (sharing feelings about oneself and), clarity, continuity tracking (staying on topic), and respect (affective aspects of communication and problem-solving skills in couples and families) [13]. Communication is the third dimension of the circumplex model and is considered to facilitate the other two dimensions. This means that cohesiveness and flexibility are not enough, but the communication obtained between family members must also be fine.

In everyday communication, A seems to speak two languages, which are Indonesian and English. However, it seems that the variety of the two languages makes him difficult in understanding the language in learning activities and when communicating with his peers, especially in Bahasa Indonesia. This can be seen when he tries to express his opinion during online learning or PJJ, his friends seem didn't pay attention because they don't understand what he is saying. Not only that, but he also tried to approach his friends while playing directly with them and he did not get a good response because his friends did not understand what he said and it finally made A not want to play with his friends anymore. Based on what Coie [18] explained before, the rejection or lack of response by these friends could be due to the lack of social skills.

A also has low communication with his father. This is because he has only been communicating with his father more in the past two years and talking and playing video games together. It is very important to improve A's communication with his father so that he can improve his communication skills, such as speaking for himself [13].

Based on the behavioral problems experienced by A, it can be seen that every family member strive to make the family function working out. However, each of family function's aspect which is cohesiveness, flexibility, and communication is still need to be improve. Not only to overcome A's problem behavior but every family member also must participate actively. This is because the function of the family is very important in the development of personality and character formation [21].

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the data obtained, it can be concluded that A has several behavioral problems, especially externalizing problems. Based on family function theory, the functioning of A's family has problem in its three aspects which is cohesiveness, flexibility, and communication. So, there is still a need to maintain the cohesiveness between family member so A can be independent, especially in doing his homework; in flexibility, parents or family member must has the same agreement about applying the rules more consistently; communication also needed to be built between family member to identify A's needs so that every family member know how to deal with A's behavioral problems. Not only that but also

communication between A's and his father need to be deepen so that A can also practice his communication skills.

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