



# The Influence of Intergenerational Relationship and Parent-Child Relationship on Social Anxiety of Left-Behind Children in Rural Areas in China

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**Abstract.** With the continuous development of Chinese economy, people's living standard has been improved greatly. However, in rural regions, economic development is much slower compared to urban areas. To change the economic condition of family, most farmers chose to work in cities. This results in the continuous growth of left-behind children population, and it has attracted more and more scholars in the field of social science and education to investigate this issue. This study examined the influence of intergenerational relationship and parent-child relationship on social anxiety of left-behind children in rural areas in China. It also shows the main problems and causes of left-behind children in rural areas in China. In this study, Parent-child Relationship Scale (PCRT) and Children's Social Anxiety Scale (SASC) were used to collect first-hand information and materials. Correlational analysis was used to analyze the collected data. According to the findings, the following conclusions can be drawn: (1) In terms of parent-child relationship, whether the child is the only child in the family has no significant influence on the parent-child relationship. The grade level of child has no significant effect on the parent-child relationship. (2) Intergenerational relationship has no significant influence on children's social anxiety. (3) The influence of parent-child relationship on children's social anxiety is significant. This study can provide some directions to future intervention research for left-behind children in China.

**Keywords:** Left-Behind Children · Social Anxiety · Parent-Child Relationship · Intergenerational Relationship

## 1 Introduction

Due to the adjustment of rural industrial structure, a large number of surplus labours stagnate at home. In recent years, most farmers chose to work in cities to change the economic situation of their families, which resulted in leaving women and children at home. In some cases, even only the elderly and children were left at home. These remaining children form a special social group which is called the rural left-behind children. Left-behind children refers to children under the age of 14 whose parents have moved to cities or other areas. This group can be divided into two categories. One category is involved with only the father or mother who left, and the other category

is involved with both father and mother who left. The children usually live with their grandparents or relatives, if both parents left. According to the research report on the status of rural left-behind children by the Chinese Women's Federation in 2021, there are about 61,025,500 rural left-behind children in China. Plus, there are more than 31 million left-behind children in compulsory education, which account for 37.7% of rural children and 27.88% of national children [1]. Compared with the estimated data of 1% of a survey in 2016, the number of left-behind children in rural areas in China had risen by 2.42 million over the past five years [1].

### **1.1 Research Background**

In recent years, with the accelerating pace of economic reformation, opening-up and modernization, more and more people in Chinese rural areas chose to work in cities, which resulted in a continuous increase of the number of left-behind children. Because of its large population size, more and more social professors and researchers have turned to the study of left-behind children. Due to the lack of parental roles, the instability of parent-child relationship has a great impact on the physical and mental health of left-behind children in rural areas in China. As a result, they are more likely to suffer from social anxiety compared to children from typical families.

### **1.2 Concept of Social Anxiety**

Social anxiety refers to a discomfort or a fear when a person is in social interactions. It is involved with concerns or worries about being judged or evaluated by others. It is typically characterized by an intense fear of what others are thinking about the individual, specifically fear of embarrassment and rejection. It eventually leads to insecure feelings in social situations. Different from the general sense of anxiety, individuals with social anxiety tend to feel uncomfortable and nervous in social interactions. Gaining too much attention can cause them to feel uncomfortable and embarrassed, especially when they are placed in a strange environment. They tend to worry excessively about their own words and behaviors. This is accompanied by the fear of being laughed at, and sometimes they show distinct anxiety patterns externally [2]. Children's social anxiety can lead to strains in their interpersonal relationship, their personal lives, and future career development. The social anxiety can also be spread to other children when they share their worries. In sum, social anxiety has a serious impact on children's social communication and development [3].

### **1.3 Concept of Intergenerational Relationship**

The intergenerational relationship is the relationship formed by grandparents and grandchildren. Compared with the parent-child relationship, the intergenerational lineal blood relationship refers to the relationship in which the grandparents mainly bear the responsibility of raising the grandchildren in family. It is due to the long-term separation of children and their parents, so that children are completely raised by grandparents alone [4]. A series of factors can aggravate children's social anxiety in this relationship, such as

hindering children's acceptance of new things, ignoring children's nature, and restricting children's activities for the sake of safety. Due to the low-level education and outdated concepts of grandparents, children's perspectives can be influenced largely [5].

#### **1.4 Concept of Parent-Child Relationship**

The relationship between parents and their biological, adopted or stepchildren is defined as the parent-child relationship. Parent-child relationship is the earliest human relationship established for children. Parents' character, upbringing, education methods, and attitudes towards children have a direct impact on the physical and mental development of children. It can also affect the future interpersonal relations of children. Parent-child relationship is an important part of individual. In early childhood, it is almost the only emotional support of the child [4].

The issues of left-behind children have attracted extensive social attention, and more and more scholars in the fields of sociology and education have been gradually focusing their research on left-behind children in rural areas in China. In recent years, the number of research regarding parent-child relationship has increased. At present, there are abundant researches on parent-child relationship and social anxiety of children in China. However, there are not enough in-depth researches on the influence of inter-generational relationship and parent-child relationship on social anxiety of left-behind children in rural areas in China. The investigation into this issue has a great significance to the development of left-behind children. These research gaps need to be examined and filled. Therefore, this paper used the method of questionnaire survey to make a more comprehensive and intuitive evaluation of this issue. This research can contribute to future intervention studies and practices for left-behind children in China.

## **2 Method and Materials**

### **2.1 Subjects**

179 left-behind children (aged 9 to 14) from grade 3 to grade 6 of Primary School B in Yingde city and their parents were included. Among the left-behind children, there are 89 children who are the only child in the family, accounting for 49.72% of the sample. And 90 children are not the only child in the family, accounting for 50.28% of the sample. Among the guardians, there are 112 people who are one of the child's parents, accounting for 62.57%. In addition, 67 are children's grandparents, accounting for 37.43%.

### **2.2 Research Instrument**

The Parental Bonding Instrument compiled by Parker in 1979 was adopted, which had a total of 20 questions. The results were interpreted by means of total scores, which were divided into three parts. 60 or less indicates that parent-child relationship is in crisis. A score between 60 and 80 indicates a good parent-child relationship with room for improvement, and a score above 80 indicates a good parent-child relationship. The reliability and validity of the scale was 0.82 [6]. The Social Anxiety Scale for Children,

compiled by La Greca, 1988, was also used in this study. The Scale consists of 10 items and is graded in three levels: “Never” (0 points), “sometimes” (1 point), and “always” (2 points). Main test contents are: (1) fear of negation, such as fear of being made fun of (6 items); (2) social avoidance and distress, such as feeling shy when surrounded by strangers and feeling nervous when talking with strangers (4 items). The children were asked to complete and rate the scale themselves. The higher the score, the more severe the social anxiety is. The reliability and validity of the scale was 0.87 [7].

### 2.3 Data Collection Procedure

179 left-behind children and their guardians were gathered together, and corresponding questionnaires were distributed one by one. The questionnaires were returned after being given corresponding time to answer. After excluding invalid questionnaires, 179 social anxiety questionnaires and 179 parent-child relationship questionnaires were collected.

### 2.4 Data Analysis

Using the method of correlation analysis in SPSS, this study analysed the two variables of parent-child relationship and social anxiety among left-behind children in rural China. It aims to measure the degree of correlation between the two variables. Correlation analysis can be carried out, as both variables are measured by ratio scales. They both have a normal distribution. Plus, the samples are selected randomly from the population.

## 3 Results

As can be seen from Table 1, the significance value of parent-child relationship for social anxiety of rural left-behind children is 0.001, indicating that this correlation is significant. The correlation coefficient value is  $-0.549$ , which is a negative correlation. Therefore, this hypothesis is valid. The better the parent-child relationship, the lower the degree of social anxiety in rural left-behind children is. This result is not different for children at different grade level. Whether the child is the only child in family or not has no effect on this result. The correlation between intergenerational relationship and social anxiety is not significant.

**Table 1.** Correlation analysis outcomes

		Parent-child relationship	Social anxiety
Parent-child relationship	Pearson	1	$-0.549$
	Sig.		0.001
	Cases	179	179
Social anxiety	Pearson	$-0.549$	1
	Sig.	0.001	
	Cases	179	179

## 4 Discussion

The better the parent-child relationship, the lower the child's social anxiety is. In the process of forming a child's personality, the family of origin plays a crucial role. The more stable the parenting, the more the child will believe in himself or herself. Additionally, the better the parent-child relationship, the higher the child's self-efficacy will become. Self-efficacy refers to the speculations and judgments made by individuals on their ability to complete a certain behavior [8]. On the contrary, if parents do not believe or often deny children's thoughts and words, then children will have a low sense of self-efficacy, which may even make them feel worthless. In this case, they tend to care too much about others' feelings, try to deliberately please others, and put others first in everything without considering their own feelings. Even when they really don't want to do something, they tend to do it to get their parents' attention or their praises and affirmation. Children usually think that other people don't like them because they're not good enough or motivated enough [8]. However, the surrounding environmental factors are uncontrollable. If children complete a series of actions and they still do not get recognition and praise from their parents, they will become very anxious and worry about why they are not recognized by their parents. They wonder whether it is because they are not as good as others, so their parents are not satisfied with them and do not like them. This situation can become much more serious for left-behind children, because they have not been around their parents often. They lack the opportunity to communicate and interact with their parents in daily life. Therefore, when their parents come back occasionally, it becomes an opportunity for them to express themselves positively to their parents in order to obtain and make up for the missed recognition and praises from parents. If they do not receive praises and affirmation from their parents, they will not only feel that they are not as good as others, but also feel that their parents do not praise them because they are not that important. It also makes them think that they might be so unimportant that their parents would rather work far away than staying with them. This situation can lead to some serious doubts about their own self-worth [8]. Low self-worth can cause children to lose confidence in themselves, not to try anything, and grow up in consistent denial. The impact of negative emotional language from parents will make them become less and less confident and doubt themselves deeply from the heart. If children don't trust themselves, they won't trust their parents, let alone someone outside of their original family. This can dramatically increase the development of their social anxiety. When they try to communicate with others, they cannot talk freely with others. The anxiety can even spread to other people, making them feel uncomfortable too. In the long-term, this can seriously damage their social relationships and mental health [8].

## 5 Countermeasures

### 5.1 Family

The social anxiety of left-behind children is influenced by family factors, such as parenting style, working time, and frequency of contacting with the children. Therefore, a good family atmosphere can help left-behind children form a good social model. Parents should communicate with their children more, let them feel loved, and let them express

themselves freely. Parents should also pay more attention to their children while being busy with their work. In their spare time, they should go home to visit their children or have video chats with their children on the phone, which can reduce the anxiety level of left-behind children to some extent [9]. Secondly, handling family relations well and creating a harmonious and harmonious family atmosphere are both important. Reducing conflicts and arguments, being more attentive to the children and understanding their needs are crucial. The left-behind children should have more positive emotions, have expectations for life and the future, and increase their happiness [10].

## 5.2 School

The first goal should be improving the teaching quality and comprehensive quality. By improving the teaching level of teachers, the teaching methods should become closer to the growth experience of left-behind children. The second intervention is group coaching. The group counselling is related to improvement of the intention and ability of interpersonal communication of left-behind children. In addition, it has a significant effect on improving interpersonal communication status. The third intervention is setting up psychological counselling rooms at schools. The establishment of psychological counselling rooms on campus is conducive to professional counselling for the social problems of left-behind children.

## 5.3 Social Aspects

First, relevant government agencies and departments should cooperate to collect volunteers for “one-to-one assistance” in learning to improve the academic level of left-behind children. Carrying out special lectures of children’s mental health experts is essential, so that left-behind children can gradually eliminate the negative emotions in social interaction. Second, making full use of the media is essential. Barbara Fredrickson, a distinguished professor of positive psychology, has proposed the “extension-construction theory” on this topic as an example. This point of view shows that under the individual’s subjective positive emotional state, the individual’s action power is enhanced, which leads to the expansion of social scope and the improvement of interpersonal communication ability. Therefore, if the “mimicry environment” of network social communication constituted by video can be well used, it can also play a positive role in interpersonal communication [11]. Third, appropriate economic support should be given to left-behind children. The government can implement policies, such as educational subsidies, tuition exemption, and public fund-raising for left-behind children.

# 6 Suggestions for Future Research

## 6.1 Sample Selection

Most studies in this field generally describe the sample as left-behind children, but the starting time of left-behind is a key factor. Different period of being left-behind is likely to have different degrees of influence on social anxiety. In addition, the geographical

difference is also a potential factor that cannot be ignored. At present, many studies focus on left-behind children in rural areas in China, but less attention is paid to left-behind children in cities. The causes of urban left-behind children are more diverse and complex, and it is more difficult to quantify the social situation and carry out effective interventions.

## 6.2 Systematic, Standardized and Targeted Measures

Relevant research should place importance to positive perspectives, such as life satisfaction and happiness of left-behind children. Most studies focus on the social adaptability and psychological status of left-behind children, such as loneliness, depression and psychological isolation, while less attention is paid to their positive aspects of development. This study mainly focused on the negative impact of separating from parents on left-behind children. Future research should investigate the positive traits of left-behind children as well, such as resilience. In addition, the effectiveness of coping measures can be affected by the individual personality traits of left-behind children, and the lack of systematic integration of coping methods in this area of research makes it more difficult to quantify the effect [12]. At present, there is no conventional model for left-behind children in China, and the scale for social dysfunction of left-behind children is still defined by non-standardized diagnosis. Therefore, the next step should aim to improve the reliability of relevant scales [13].

## 7 Conclusion

With the increasing number of left-behind children in rural areas in China in recent decades, people pay more and more attention to this special group. Plus, various issues existing in rural left-behind children have been gradually revealed, such as their social anxiety, mental health problems, education status, physical development, immunization, crime phenomenon, accident harm, adaptation of society and family, quality of survival, and personality development. Left-behind children lack the companionship, care, and guidance of their parents for a long time. In addition, their grandparents tend to have low education quality, improper upbringing, and ineffective supervision. The children's psychological needs usually cannot be satisfied. School education does not pay enough attention to left-behind children's psychological well-being, which may lead to mental health problems, such as sensitivity, loneliness, inferiority complex, depression, self-closure, emotional vulnerability, social withdrawal, or a lack of sense of security. It can lead to a series of mental health problems, such as social anxiety. On the basis of previous scholars' research and investigation, this paper used correlation analysis to analyse the two variables of social anxiety and parent-child relationship in left-behind children in rural China. It is suggested that in the future research of rural left-behind children, the consistency of research design, such as sampling procedure, scale selection, and the completeness of data analysis methods should be maintained as far as possible. Therefore, the results of comprehensive evaluation can be more reliable. Based on the results of current study, it is suggested that the government, schools, communities, and families should make joint efforts to implement the practical countermeasures to promote

the mental health development of rural left-behind children in China. This paper can provide some guidance to future intervention practices and research for this special population.

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