

Countermeasures for the Mental Health Problems of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas

Linqi Zhang*

Affiliated High School to Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou, China

*a18967118921@qq.com

Abstract: This paper conducts a research on the mental health issues of left-behind children in rural areas resulting from the long-term migration of their parents for work. The mental health problems of rural left-behind children are complex and diverse. Their individual psychological characteristics vary significantly due to differences in family structure, intergenerational parenting styles, and social support, making it difficult to formulate universal intervention strategies. The dispersion of family, school, and social resources hinders the effective implementation of multi-party cooperation mechanisms. The scarcity of rural educational resources and the weakness of professional psychological counseling forces are prominent. The emotional needs and psychological changes of left-behind children are concealed and difficult to detect, posing challenges to dynamic monitoring and effective intervention. The psychology-practice-oriented intervention measures proposed in this study include strengthening family emotional support, setting up school emotion management courses, and improving the home-school communication mechanism to alleviate their anxiety, depression, loneliness, and personality development problems.

Keywords: Rural Left-Behind Children, Mental Health Problems, Family and School, Intervention Measures, Personality Development.

1. Introduction

Left-behind children, specifically those minors whose parents are absent for extended periods due to migrant work, often rely on grandparents, relatives, or temporary guardians for daily care. These children face multiple challenges during their formative years, including limited educational resources, unmet emotional needs, and inadequate financial support. [2] Particularly in mental health, the issues they encounter are especially pronounced. Prolonged separation from parental companionship often leads to psychological problems, primarily manifested as:

1) Anxiety, Depression and Loneliness: Long-term separation from parents makes left-behind children prone to emotional issues like anxiety and depression. They often worry about the future and lack confidence in life. In daily life, these children miss out on emotional communication with their parents and fail to receive timely comfort or encouragement when facing difficulties and setbacks, leading to feelings of loneliness and helplessness.

2) Personality Development Issues: Inferiority Complex: Some left-behind children may develop an inferiority complex due to their unique family circumstances and living conditions. They might perceive themselves as inferior to others, leading to social withdrawal in interpersonal interactions. Additionally, prolonged isolation from parental companionship and guidance may result in introverted personalities. These children often become reluctant to communicate with others and show limited interest in their surroundings and daily experiences.

3) Behavioral and Disciplinary Issues: Aggressive tendencies: Some left-behind children may resort to aggressive behaviors to seek attention or protect themselves. When interacting with peers, they often display heightened hostility and aggression. Due to inadequate supervision and education, some of these children may exhibit disciplinary issues such as truancy, skipping classes, and internet addiction.

4) Cognitive Development Challenges: Lack of Learning Motivation: Due to insufficient parental supervision and encouragement, some left-behind children may lack academic motivation, showing low enthusiasm for studies which could negatively impact their academic performance. Influenced by their living conditions and environment, these children might develop cognitive biases, such as holding overly simplistic views about society or having an inaccurate understanding of interpersonal relationships.

These challenges not only affect their academic performance but also negatively impact their daily social interactions. According to data from China's Ministry of Civil Affairs, although the number of left-behind children in primary schools has decreased for 11 consecutive years by 11.9% year-on-year, and those in junior high schools have dropped by 5.6%, the overall scale remains substantial. Official statistics from Guizhou Province alone show 379,700 left-behind children in 2024. Data from 2025 indicates that over 40% of these children suffer psychological trauma due to guardianship gaps. Their physical and mental health issues urgently require in-depth reflection and research. From a micro perspective of individual development, the absence of family members exerts profound yet undeniable impacts on children's growth. During the summer vacation of 2024, I had the privilege of participating in a volunteer teaching program in rural Hainan. This valuable opportunity allowed me to closely observe and deeply understand the living conditions of left-behind children in villages, identify current mental health issues and their causes. In this article, I propose targeted interventions from three dimensions: family, school, and society, aiming to alleviate anxiety, depression, loneliness, and personality development challenges, ultimately seeking effective solutions to help these children better navigate various challenges in their growth process.

2. Literature Review

Liu Zhijun (2025) in "The Impact of Intergenerational Care on the Mental Health and Social Adaptability of Left-Behind Children" proposed that intergenerational care may reduce depression risks due to grandparents' overindulgence, but also lead to psychological resilience deficiencies through lax discipline. In terms of social adaptability, children under intergenerational guardianship showed significantly lower trustworthiness and community integration in adulthood. [5] Based on existing data, left-behind children starting preschool at an early age had twice the likelihood of depression compared to non-left-behind children, while their adult intergenerational caregivers exhibited poorer social skills, characterized by "insufficient interpersonal confidence." Policy recommendations were proposed to optimize the System of Child Affairs Directors, enhance support for intergenerational care families through professional training, and prioritize single-parent guardianship to avoid premature or prolonged separation. Gao Huibin (2010) in "A Brief Discussion on the Psychological Development of Left-Behind Children" divided psychological research into two phases -- Early (2002-2006) identified widespread anxiety and depression among left-behind children, while later studies (after 2007) revealed individual variations in psychological issues, with some children demonstrating greater independence due to stronger psychological resilience. Children under intergenerational guardianship exhibited more pronounced psychological problems, whereas single-parent guardians showed minimal differences from non-left-behind children, with maternal abandonment significantly reducing negative impacts. [3] Left-behind children typically lack family education, experience parental absence, and live in households with low-educated grandparents. Multiple surveys cited, such as one from a primary school in Hubei Province, revealed that 96.7% of left-behind children exhibited psychological issues, including suicidal tendencies in 4.84%. Xu Fang identifies value discrepancies as a manifestation of psychological issues among left-behind children.[1] She notes that some students develop academic aversion, viewing education as futile. These children, whose parents similarly lack formal education yet work across regions, often choose to pursue manual labor instead of further studies, leading to poor academic performance and lack of ambition. A 2004 psychological survey conducted by Changling Town Central Primary School in Guangshui City, Hubei Province, among 681 left-behind students revealed that 96.7% (659 students) exhibited varying degrees of psychological distress, with 37.89% (258 students) showing severe symptoms. Among these, 4.84% (33 students) exhibited serious psychological disorders including suicidal tendencies and runaway behavior. Li Yao's 2024 study "Psychological Issues and Countermeasures for Rural Left-Behind Children" [4] highlights common problems such as low self-esteem, social withdrawal, rebellious behavior, distorted values, poor interpersonal relationships, and emotional emptiness, all stemming from prolonged parental absence and emotional neglect. Social factors include household registration restrictions causing separation, inadequate mental health education in schools, and intergenerational parenting issues like overindulgence or neglect. The article documents a case where a left-behind girl's emotional distress improved significantly after her father increased communication frequency following

discussions between the homeroom teacher and parents, despite his initial perfunctory responses during phone calls. The authors also propose seven measures, including strengthening mental health training for teachers, offering psychological courses, organizing extracurricular activities, individual psychological counseling, home-school linkage (such as regular video communication), and mobilizing social forces (such as community volunteers).

To sum up, left-behind children are prone to psychological, personality and behavioral problems due to long-term separation from their parents, which requires the cooperation of families, schools and the government.

3. Overview of Psychological Problems of Left-behind Children

1) Long-term separation from parents, left-behind children are prone to anxiety, depression and loneliness. They may worry about the future, lack confidence in life, and lack emotional communication with their parents.

2) Personality Development Issues: Inferiority Complex: Some left-behind children may develop an inferiority complex due to their unique family circumstances and living conditions. They might perceive themselves as less capable than others, leading to social withdrawal in interpersonal interactions. Additionally, prolonged isolation from parental companionship and guidance may result in introverted personalities. These children often become withdrawn, showing reluctance to communicate with others and demonstrating limited interest in their surroundings and daily activities.

3) Behavioral and Disciplinary Issues: Aggressive tendencies: Some left-behind children may resort to aggressive behaviors to seek attention or protect themselves. When interacting with peers, they often display heightened hostility and aggression. Due to inadequate supervision and education, some of these children may exhibit disciplinary issues such as truancy, skipping classes, and excessive internet use.

4) Cognitive Development Challenges: Lack of Learning Motivation: Due to insufficient parental supervision and encouragement, some left-behind children may lack academic motivation, showing low enthusiasm for studies and potentially affecting their academic performance. Influenced by their living conditions and environment, these children may develop cognitive biases, such as holding overly simplistic views of society or having inaccurate understanding of interpersonal relationships.

4. Interventions to Alleviate Anxiety, Depression and Loneliness in Left-behind Children

4.1. Family Level: Establish a Stable Emotional Support System

1) Regular parent-child interaction: Migrant parents are encouraged to take out a fixed time every week to have 2-3 high-quality video calls with their children, conduct in-depth communication and pay attention to their children's emotional needs.

2) Emotional diary plan: Provide left-behind children with special emotional record books to guide them to freely express their daily emotions and thoughts through writing, and have their guardians regularly sort out key contents and

give feedback to their parents, so as to enhance the emotional connection and understanding between parents and children.

4.2. School Level: Strengthen Mental Health Education

1) Psychological Counseling Course: A systematic emotion management course is offered for one class hour per week, in which professional teachers teach students to identify emotions and scientific techniques to relieve stress and release emotions (such as deep breathing exercise, listening to music to relax, moderate exercise, etc.).

2) Peer support groups: A structured "growth partner" mutual aid group is established to organize regular group activities (such as themed role-playing, emotional sharing sessions, cooperative games, etc.) to enable children with similar family background and experience to interact and communicate in a safe environment, effectively reduce loneliness, and enhance social belonging and support.

4.3. Home-school Cooperation: Build a Dynamic Monitoring Network

1) Monthly Emotional Status Reporting System: Establish a monthly communication mechanism between teachers and guardians to thoroughly discuss children's recent emotional fluctuations, behavioral changes, and daily performance. This collaborative approach aims to strengthen dynamic monitoring of mental health issues among left-behind children. Should persistent depressive or anxiety tendencies be detected, immediate coordination with school psychological counselors will be initiated for professional assessment and intervention.

5. Intervention Strategies to Improve the Character Development of Left-behind Children

5.1. Family Level: Optimize Parenting Methods

Intergenerational Parenting Training: To address the challenges of grandparents' relatively low educational levels and traditional parenting philosophies, local governments or communities regularly organize "Grandparent Education Workshops". These workshops systematically train caregivers in nonviolent communication techniques, positive discipline methods, and child psychology knowledge. This initiative helps grandparents transition from critical and accusatory parenting approaches to adopting scientific methods for daily management and guidance of their grandchildren.

5.2. School Level: Strengthen the Cultivation of Positive Personality

1) Confidence Building Program: Conduct regular class sessions like "Discovering Strengths" and "My Small Achievements" to encourage peer observation and sincere recognition of each other's strengths and progress. Guide students weekly to set achievable small goals, publicly recognize those who successfully complete them, and gradually build confidence through consistent progress.

2) Interest Club Development: By leveraging existing resources, we will establish affordable extracurricular clubs in painting, music, sports, and handicrafts to provide left-behind children with platforms for skill development and talent demonstration. Cultivating these talents can effectively

address tendencies toward social withdrawal and introversion. Additionally, we will increase the frequency and variety of outdoor activity classes and physical education sessions, guiding students to release stress, regulate emotions, and build physical resilience through outdoor engagement and sports participation, while rediscovering their self-worth and joy in life.

3) Positive role model publicity: In the community bulletin board, school bulletin board and other prominent places, regularly display the inspirational cases of local left-behind children who overcome difficulties, actively grow up and make progress to enhance their self-confidence and sense of self-identity, and provide positive role models.

5.3. Government Level: Provide Professional Resources

Public welfare psychological consultation: Coordinate with the local hospital's psychiatric department or professional psychological counseling institutions to conduct free mental health screening and assessment activities for all students on campus regularly. Provide free, confidential professional one-to-one psychological counseling services for left-behind children who are found to have serious self-doubt tendency or outstanding personality development problems.

6. Integrated Interventions to Reduce Behaviour and Disciplinary Problems

6.1. Family Level: Clear Code of Conduct

Family Contract System: Guardians and children collaboratively establish clear behavioral guidelines through open communication, including daily screen time limits, structured schedules, and household responsibilities. While parents reside elsewhere, they must monitor compliance via remote communication (e.g., video calls or phone chats), providing timely feedback (praise or appropriate discipline) to ensure adherence. This system strengthens children's trust in their parents while reducing loneliness and behavioral issues caused by inadequate supervision.

6.2. School Level: Behaviour Correction Plan

Positive Behavior Support: Implement the "Positive Behavior Support Program" by promptly offering specific and clear praise and rewards (such as points, small prizes, privileges) to students who demonstrate discipline and good behavior, reinforcing their positive actions. For problematic behaviors, prioritize non-punitive interventions like guidance, communication, and temporary isolation, while emphasizing the teaching of appropriate alternative behaviors.

6.3. Faculty Development

Encourage and support passionate young faculty members to engage in education for left-behind children. When selecting homeroom teachers, prioritize candidates demonstrating strong responsibility, patience, and psychological counseling skills to ensure effective classroom management and proper care for these students.

6.4. Home-school Collaboration: Closed-loop Management Mechanism

Enhancing Home-School Collaboration: Schools have implemented a rigorous home visit system, conducting

comprehensive home visits at least once per semester. Teachers proactively engage with families to gain in-depth insights into the daily lives, challenges, and family support systems of left-behind children. Through parent-teacher meetings, phone calls, and digital platforms, schools maintain regular communication channels with guardians to monitor children's behavioral patterns. This collaborative approach creates an educational synergy, establishing a closed-loop management system that enables early detection of issues, facilitates information exchange, and ensures coordinated interventions.

7. System of Child Affairs Directors

System of Child Affairs Directors originated from the "China Child Welfare Demonstration Project" launched in 2010. In 2019, ten Chinese government agencies including the Ministry of Civil Affairs jointly issued the "Guidelines on Further Improving the Care Service System for Left-Behind Children and Children in Difficult Circumstances", which clarified the responsibilities of child welfare directors. This system establishes dedicated child welfare directors in communities to comprehensively collect information about local children, categorize them into different groups, and provide targeted services based on these classifications, ensuring all children receive necessary care and protection. Its core mission is to provide institutional safeguards for children, particularly those in difficult circumstances. In rural areas, left-behind children form the primary group of disadvantaged children, with the intergenerational parenting model highlighted in this study being a special focus. According to the "2023 Statistical Bulletin on Civil Affairs Development", China had appointed 582,000 child welfare directors by the end of 2023. Despite challenges such as fragmented implementation during execution, the system remains a crucial institutional force in China due to its comprehensive coverage, grassroots integration, and child-friendly nature. Future improvements through professional empowerment, technological enhancement, and career development could optimize the current system, providing institutionalized social support for left-behind children—especially those under intergenerational care. This would help mitigate the negative impacts of intergenerational parenting on individual mental health and social adaptability. Social support theory demonstrates that social support can effectively alleviate psychological stress responses, ease mental tension, and enhance social adaptability. The effective implementation of the System of Child Affairs Directors provides substantial support for intergenerational parenting of left-behind children through resource coordination, routine visits, family guidance, and platform services. Additionally, it fosters subjective emotional support by promoting awareness campaigns, creating supportive environments, and organizing group activities. Therefore, Liu Zhijun (2025)[5] proposed in "The Impact of Intergenerational Parenting on Left-Behind Children's Mental Health and Social Adaptability" that optimizing and implementing the System of Child Affairs Directors—already widely adopted at grassroots community levels—can solidify child welfare services. This approach establishes a robust developmental ecosystem for left-behind children and all minors, creating a viable pathway forward.

8. Sum up

This study investigates mental health issues among rural

left-behind children caused by their parents' prolonged absence for work, including anxiety, depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, behavioral deviations, and cognitive development disorders. These problems not only affect children's academic performance and social skills but also profoundly impact their long-term personality formation and mental well-being. Addressing these issues can improve the growth environment for left-behind children and promote social equity and harmonious development. First, the psychological challenges faced by left-behind children are complex and varied, with different individuals exhibiting distinct mental characteristics due to differences in family structures, intergenerational parenting approaches, and social support. This complexity poses challenges for developing universal intervention strategies. Second, the fragmented distribution of family, school, and social resources makes effective multi-party collaboration difficult to implement, particularly in rural areas where educational resources are scarce and professional psychological counseling services are insufficient. Additionally, the subtle emotional needs and psychological changes of left-behind children often go unnoticed, making dynamic monitoring and timely intervention particularly challenging.

The author proposes three-tiered interventions: At the family level, regular parent-child video calls and emotional journals enhance emotional support; at the school level, emotion management courses and peer support groups reduce loneliness; through home-school collaboration, communication channels between teachers and guardians are established for timely psychological assessments. Key strategies include optimizing grandparents' parenting workshops, strengthening positive personality development programs and behavioral correction plans, while implementing motivational incentives and teacher training. Comprehensive measures encompass family contract systems, public welfare psychological counseling, and closed-loop management mechanisms, with coordinated efforts through home visits and school-family communication. Research demonstrates that addressing psychological issues among left-behind children requires multi-stakeholder collaboration, with measures grounded in psychological theories and demonstrating strong practicality. Unexpectedly, some children exhibited high psychological resilience, necessitating personalized intervention plans for future development.

While working away from home may improve a family's financial situation and enhance the material living standards of left-behind children, prolonged parental migration—particularly simultaneous migration, early departure during childhood, or extended absences—can cause irreversible harm to children's development. To address this, families, communities, schools, and governments must take coordinated actions at different levels. For families, when migration becomes unavoidable, parents should prioritize single-parent arrangements, delayed departures, and short-term stays whenever possible, thereby avoiding the negative impacts of intergenerational caregiving and premature/extended care dependency. Communities should implement the System of Child Affairs Directors by conducting routine child monitoring, providing parenting guidance, organizing recreational activities, and managing public spaces. Schools need to focus on resilience-building and social adaptation education for left-behind children under family guardianship. Governments should refine social

welfare policies and urban-rural development plans to reduce rural family fragmentation, thereby fundamentally decreasing the number of children subjected to intergenerational care.

References

- [1] Xu Fang. Mental health status of rural left-behind children and school-based curriculum development [J]. China Rural Education, 2006(6):47-48.
- [2] Hu Zhaoyang. Report on the Status of Ten Million Left-Behind Children in Rural Areas [J]. Decision-Making and Information, 2005(8):7-11.
- [3] Gao Huibin. (2010). A Brief Study on the Psychological Development of Left-Behind Children. Chinese Journal of Education, *2010*(S1),18-20.
- [4] Li Yao. (2024). Psychological Problems and Countermeasures of Left-Behind Children in Rural Areas. Mental Health Education for Primary and Secondary Schools, *2024*(5),72-74.
- [5] Liu Zhijun. (2025). The impact of intergenerational upbringing on the mental health and social adaptability of left-behind children. Educational Research, *46*(3),112-125.