

The Marginalization of Parent-Child Relationships and its Challenges to Students' Mental Health

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Abstract: This section mainly analyzes the reasons and current situation of the weakening of parent-child relationships, as well as their impact on the psychological health of children. The so-called indifferent parent-child relationship refers to a state where the relationship between parents and children is cold, communication is not smooth, or there is no communication or mechanical interaction. The phenomenon of indifferent parent-child relationships is becoming increasingly frequent and spreading in current family education. This section first elaborates on the reasons for the indifference of parent-child relationships from the perspectives of the influence of social environment, academic competition, online media, and the transformation of family roles. It then explores the psychological difficulties that marginalized relationships can bring to students, such as long-term emotional loss, confusion of identity, acquisition of negative interpersonal patterns, and deviation in coping strategies; The third part proposes a path to rebuilding the relationship, starting from small things in life and achieving it through non-utilitarian companionship, active listening, expressing vulnerability, and collaborative tasks. Reshaping emotional bonds, reconstructing communication methods, downplaying perfect expectations, and reshaping cooperative relationships can provide practical guidance on how to handle family parent-child relationships and help students establish a good psychological state.

Keywords: Marginalization of Parent-Child Relationships, Student Mental Health, Emotional Connection, Family Interaction, Relationship Reshaping.

1. Introduction

Family is the primary environment for individual socialization, and the most essential parent-child relationship is the fundamental force for the psychological growth of children and adolescents. Good parent-child interaction can provide people with a sense of security, value, and behavioral templates, and is the nourishment for a healthy personality and strong psychology. However, with the rapid development of modern society and cities, the acceleration of the pace of life and the intensification of social competition, as well as the deep invasion of digital lifestyles on people, the marginalization of parent-child relationships is a gradually estranged state. It is not completely devoid of parent-child relationships, but rather a state of weak emotional connection, limited communication, and gradual loss of connection. Being under the same roof without feeling connected, enjoying the warmth of things without the joy of emotions, and focusing on other aspects such as children's grades while neglecting emotional experiences and relationships themselves... Such marginalized behaviors seem to form an invisible wall, hindering students from receiving emotional nourishment in the family and causing great difficulties for growing students. Developmental ecology theory emphasizes that the family is the most important microsystem for individual development, which greatly affects the growth process of children and adolescents. The weakening of family functions destroys the emotional and relational foundations needed for children and adolescents in their growth process. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem theory, individual development is nested within interconnected environmental systems, and the quality of the family, as the innermost microsystem, directly affects an individual's cognitive, emotional, and social development[1]. Therefore, this article intends to explore the reasons for the alienation of parent-child relationships from a micro level, as well as the

importance of good parent-child relationships and their damage to children's emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and interpersonal well-being. On this basis, practical methods for improving the relationship between parents and children are proposed, providing a certain reference for parents to educate their children and psychological counselors to provide adolescent psychological counseling services.

2. Analysis of Multiple Causes of Marginalization in Parent Child Relationships

The drift of parent-child relationships towards the periphery of family life is not a single causal event, but an emerging result of the intersection of macro, meso, and micro forces. It transforms the family from a shelter for relationships to a managed place for shared living.

2.1. Macro Driving Factors: Changes in Social Structure and Values

At the macro level, extensive social structural changes have rearranged the temporal and spatial logic of family life. The rapid urbanization and labor mobility have disrupted the traditional large family structure, replaced by nuclear families or dual income families as the norm. In such families, "the time poverty of working parents is profound... Long working hours and time-consuming commuting objectively strip us of something necessary for cultivating relationships: free, low-pressure coexistence time." The family is no longer the place to establish primary relationships, but more like a "scheduling field" for coordinating schedules, homework, and household chores.

At the same time, the mainstream culture's obsession with efficiency and effectiveness has changed what parents value most about their children. When the value and status of adults are closely linked to their career and educational

achievements, parents focus their investment on areas that are expected to bring the greatest competitive returns. Raising children has become a human capital investment, accompanied by huge expectations for academic performance, resume, and grades. The emotional dimensions of parent-child relationships - unconditional love, play, and emotional dialogue - do not have a clear "return on investment" measurement standard, and therefore are invisibly downgraded to a secondary, freely disposable state. The relationship itself is subordinate to the projects that should have been supported by it (the success of the child).

2.2. Medium Scale Catalyst: The Dominant Position of the "Education Anxiety Ecosystem"

School is a powerful middle-level system that directly affects the parent-child relationship. In many societies, schools have become a high stakes, zero sum game where winning or losing determines future opportunities. This' educational anxiety 'has spread to families and transformed parents' roles from caregivers to learning managers and 'shadow teachers'. Their focus has become narrow and monitored, with transcripts, homework scores, and standardized exam scores becoming the focus of communication. This obsession with grades has resulted in the following consequences: simplifying conversations into one about homework ("Do you have homework?") and criticizing performance ("Do you have homework?"). The internalized parental image of children is no longer a safe haven, but a critical audience and a major source of performance concerns. This dynamic runs counter to the core principles of attachment theory. Bowlby's attachment theory states that establishing a safe and stable emotional connection with primary caregivers (usually parents) is the foundation for individuals to gain psychological security, explore the world, and develop good interpersonal relationships[2]. A good attachment relationship can provide children with a 'safe haven', giving them the courage to explore the world around them and seek comfort when needed. This transactional nature changes the emotional stakes in the relationship: love and recognition (in the eyes of parents) seem to depend on academic achievement - what psychologists call 'conditional positive attention'. The unconditional value of children as individuals has been blurred. Relationships are no longer intrinsic and unconditional, but have transformed into utilitarian and procedural things, becoming means to achieve educational achievement goals rather than themselves.

2.3. Micro Interference Factors: Digital Invasion and Changes in Family Scripts

Within the family domain, two micro level transformations are crucial: the encroachment of digital technology on attention and the confusion of family roles. With the ubiquitous use of mobile phones, tablets, and laptops in home life, these devices have become effective third parties in home communication. They have contributed to the phenomenon of 'sustained partial attention', where people physically share a room as a family unit but are not physically present mentally, and each person is in their own information flow - this can be called the 'head down tribe' phenomenon. It reduces the number of interviews, and more importantly, its quality. The fragmented, asynchronous, and often modified nature of online communication erodes our ability and patience to engage in slow paced, subtle, and sometimes slightly chaotic

deep, face-to-face conversations, which are what are needed to create intimacy. For teenagers, the internet provides them with another temptation: a space where they can receive immediate social rewards and carefully design their own performances, and a place to escape from family groups. When real-life connections are seen as difficult or dangerous, virtual space provides a seemingly safe refuge for self-expression and social belonging, further separating oneself from parent-child relationships.

The blurring of roles and the loss of the "safe haven" function: Traditional family hierarchical structures have been impacted, but often fail to establish clear and functional democratic models to replace them. Parents find it difficult to adapt to the ambiguous identity of being both parents and friends, which sometimes leads to inconsistent or ineffective parenting styles; The confusion and uncertainty of this role may weaken parents' confidence and sense of efficacy in fulfilling their parenting responsibilities. According to Bandura's self-efficacy theory extended to the family domain, parents' parenting efficacy - that is, their belief in whether they can successfully fulfill their parenting role and promote their children's development - is the key factor affecting their parenting behavior and the quality of parent-child interaction[3]. Parents with low parenting efficacy may be more prone to anxiety and tend to adopt controlling or avoidant interaction styles, which can hinder the formation of secure attachment and the deepening of parent-child relationships. Children who are influenced by the principle of equality may be less obedient to their parents' decisions, but lack the maturity required for effective dialogue. More seriously, under external pressure, the most basic role of the family - emotional shelter - has been abandoned. A house is no longer a place of 'existence', but a place for 'action' and 'performance'. It becomes a projection of the external expressive world - a 'task group' that strives to effectively carry out various tasks required for daily life and preparing for the future. The space for unstructured relaxation, mutual display of vulnerability, and uncritical emotional support has been greatly compressed. The essence of making the family a safe haven - its ability to breathe from the outside world - is being squeezed by the demands of that world[4].

3. The Specific Challenges of Marginalized Relationships to Students' Mental Health

When the parent-child relationship is in a long-term marginalized state, it will bring a series of specific and profound mental health challenges to students who are constructing themselves, dealing with emotions, and learning social skills.

3.1. Accumulation and Manifestation of Emotional Distress

Secure attachment relations are one of the main systems for affect regulation. The parents function as 'external psychical organs' to help their child label, modulate, and full of overpowering feelings. An oppressed relationship weakens it. If one pupil feels the pain of an unsuccessful test, the hurt of being rejected by others, or confused by adolescent upheavals, and the most obvious channel through which to process those feelings - towards a parent - is effectively blocked off or seen as dangerous. The child must deal alone with confusing emotional experiences.

The result is two-folded. On the one hand there's an emotional residue which accumulates and has to be discharged in another way, often pathologically. It could become introjective: a chronic, free-floating sadness, anhedonia (loss of pleasure), somatic complaints, or even a diagnosis of clinical depression; or in the form of externalizing symptoms: increased irritability, outbursts of anger, oppositional defiance, or impulsive aggression. Second, and perhaps more insidiously, he does not learn how to regulate his own behavior internally. He never learns with parent coaching in recognizing, tolerating and adequately expressing their feelings, children come of age lacking the full range of emotion vocabulary necessary for a healthy life, always on edge from stress and susceptible to dysregulation[5].

3.2. Ambiguity and Crisis of Self Identity

The adolescence age is the crucial period of identity construction which depends largely on self-reflexive appraisal through "significant other". The parents are the most significant mirror here. In a marginalised relation, the parent's reflection is warped or empty. Criticism is missing; it is scathing; or it is highly selective ("We're proud of you if you get A's"). The child is unable to construct an integrated, valued sense of self in these shards. They are taught that it is only the "achieving self" that deserves our attention and love; all other aspects –the curious self, the creative self, the vulnerable self–the are unseen and invalidated.

This breeds the psychologist's term for "contingent self-esteem" in which self-worth is precariously attached to outside validation and performance. The student can become an endless perfectionist, motivated by a terror that any failure will be followed by a loss of love (or its functional analogue, parental approval). In contrast, they can tip over to identity diffusion where they feel empty, aimless and unsure about themselves outside the performance. Without this foundation, it is hard for people to be resilient, as setbacks are not only failures of tasks, but catastrophes for the self.

3.3. Intergenerational Internalization of Relationship Patterns

The family is the primary classroom for intimate relationships. Children unconsciously internalize the dominant patterns of interaction they witness and experience—a process known as forming internal working models. A household characterized by emotional distance, conflict avoidance, utilitarian communication, and a lack of shared vulnerability teaches the child that this is what relationships are. These schemas become the blueprint for their future interactions. For example, a child who never learned to express needs directly may become an adult who uses passive aggression or manipulation. One who never experienced healthy conflict resolution may become conflict-phobic or explosively aggressive. Most critically, they may struggle with intimacy, finding it difficult to trust, to be vulnerable, or to provide secure attachment for others. This represents the most profound long-term challenge: the marginalized relationship not only harms the present child but also sows the seeds for dysfunctional relationships in the next generation, perpetuating a cycle of emotional disconnect[6].

3.4. The Rigidity and Imbalance of Coping Mechanisms

Coping strategies are learned and not innate. Parental

scaffolding is the main source of building adaptive coping strategies such as problem-solving, help-seeking, and cognitive reframing. Without that scaffold, the child is improvising, often with disastrous results. Facing a stressful test or a peer conflict, the disadvantaged child (family) will be more reluctant to ask for help from his parents. They will rather use the avoidant coping: escapism into computer-games or Facebook, academic procrastination, or substance use. They may demonstrate dysregulated coping: lashing out verbally or physically, or turning their anger inwards with self-harm or disordered eating. Over time, this hinders growth in mental toughness—the capacity for recovery after setback. Each problem has a failed approach, leading to repeated experience with failure and helplessness, which again feeds back into the same bad cycle: stress leads to maladaptive coping, which aggravate difficulties and heighten stress, thereby reinforcing their sense of the world being uncontrollable and themselves inept. The student is thus headed down a road toward greater vulnerability for many mental health and behavior disorders.

4. The Road to Breaking Through: A Relationship Reshaping Strategy Starting from Micro level Interaction

Changing the marginalization of parental roles requires not only macro level measures or abstract appeals, but also proactive and sustained investment in daily family life at the micro level. Therefore, the following methods suggest attempting to gradually rebuild emotional bonds and transform communication styles in a more practical way.

4.1. Creating Purposeless Parent-Child Time and Rebuilding Emotional Bonds

The main idea behind the program was spending time together without any instrumental goal in mind, no talk about school work, grades, instructions, or judgements. Examples include cooking a meal together, taking a 20-min walk after dinner, working on a puzzle, listening to music, watching a movie just because you can, or just sitting and talking. Duration and activity matter little compared with quality of undivided attention and lack of performance pressure. Parents have to be there, setting down electronics and being fully present with the kid[7]. This non-pressured interaction says something powerful to kids: "You are valued for who you are, not just what you do." It is like a bank of feelings that gradually melts the ice built up through overperformance, and makes it possible to find more comfortable ground from which to speak."

4.2. Introducing Active Listening Practice and Updating Dialogue Modes

This means breaking out of the mold of preaching, lecturing and criticizing to become a dialogic process in which one listens before he speaks or understands before he teaches. Good listening requires that you look at the person whom you are addressing, using nonverbal affirmations (nods), and minimal verbal affirmations ("I see," "Go on"). The parent needs to try not to interrupt, nor give instant judgments. One of the main techniques is paraphrasing – repeating what the child says and seems to feel in order to confirm it: "I see," This behavior will make the child feel listened and understood. The parent must prefer "open

questions (“It sounds like you felt really frustrated and unfair about what happened in that game, is that right?”) rather than closed or interrogative ones. It aims at creating an environment of no judgment where they can share the things happening inside them, even if they are immature or bad in order to promote better and deeper communication [8].

4.3. Share Vulnerable Moments in the Family, Accept Reality and Imperfection

Too many families have a perfect façade; parents portray themselves as flawless and all-capable. That is an unrealistic standard that closes the door to real connection. Parents can selectively and appropriately share their own vulnerable experiences, e.g., failures in work life, missteps they have made before and what they have learnt from it, or how they really feel in stressful situations (but not by burdening the child with this). Such sharing communicates important messages that feeling bad and having many conflicting feelings are normal experiences for all people, not something to be ashamed of; but how we respond and grow from it. It can go a long way toward relieving our kids’ pressure to be perfect, and making them less afraid to show us when they struggle with or have flaws in their lives too. So, the family moves away from being a place of performing and becomes instead a real community in which people can be real, vulnerable, and complementary.

4.4. Establish Collaborative Projects and Build Growth Alliances

This approach changes “parent directs child” into “parent and child work together.” This requires doing something specific as parent-child team, such as going on a quick errand, baking a cake, building a model, or taking care of a plant or animal [9]. Both participants negotiate as relative equals – breaking down the work into pieces, sharing challenges to solve, and sharing victories (or failures) together. Parents are coaches who coach, mentors, not bosses. These activities build good collective memories and the feeling “We are a team”. Children learn life skills on how to take responsibility, planning, and problem solving, but will also help the parent better understand his/her child’s abilities and other qualities apart from academics, supporting a broader, more constructive perception of the relationship [10].

5. Conclusion

The weakening of parent-child relationships is a complex social phenomenon, and its impact on students' mental health is comprehensive, whether it is emotional or cognitive, whether it is interpersonal communication methods or psychological adjustment methods, it may have an impact. Therefore, in addition to valuing students' knowledge learning, it is also necessary to pay attention to the psychological foundation that supports their healthy growth, namely their family life, especially the familial bond between parents and children.

There is no panacea for getting out of this vicious circle, but the hopeful way is to return to the relationship itself, which lies in the constant and deliberate effort in small interactions every day. Reset the love savings account in

purposeless emotional time, open a true window of understanding through active listening, let go of the perfect mask in sharing vulnerability, and love the real other person; We have transformed our relationship from vertical hostility to horizontal alliance through cooperation.

The core is to shift the parent-child relationship from surface to substance, from function to ontology, and to encourage parents to complete role transformation and behavioral changes - from authorities and evaluators to supporters, observers, and partners. This is indeed not easy, but it is a process worth investing in. This can not only help current students relieve psychological pressure and grow up healthier and healthier, but also provide a strong emotional foundation for them to build healthy interpersonal relationships and have a happy life in the future.

Ultimately, repairing parent-child relationships is not only the starting point for safeguarding the mental health of the next generation, but also an important step in building more resilient and warm families and societies.

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