

Childhood Left-Behind Life Experience: A Painful Memory

Shanshan Wu

Jiangsu Second Normal University, Nanjing 211200, Jiangsu, China

*“We get strength and encouragement from watching children.”
-Hayao Miyazaki*

PARENTAL love and affection play a crucial role for a child’s growth. Yet, left-behind children, a special group in China, have to live in separation with their parents in childhood, deprived of parental care. The issue of left-behind children is a consequence of the disparities in economic development between rural and urban China and between western and eastern China. A large population of rural young laborers has left native places to seek better employment opportunities in developed regions. Constrained by factors related to China’s registered residence system (Hukou), these migrant workers can hardly have their families live with them in cities, and their young kids become left-behind children in rural homeplaces (Zhang & Li, 2016).

Left-behind children are often entrusted to their grandparents or other relatives. These guardians are far from ideal substitutes for their own parents. In some households, the elderly grandparents may even need the care from their young grandchildren. As a result, these left-behind children suffer additional life pressures while being deprived of parental care and protection. Also, parental absence leads to the dearth of home education in this group (Liu et al., 2016). Furthermore, rural primary and secondary school teachers typically have heavier work burdens than their urban counterparts due to teaching staff shortages and subpar operation conditions in rural schools (Zhou et al., 2005). This makes it almost impossible for left-behind children to receive special attention and supervision from their teachers, which could lower the likelihood of their being influenced by delinquent juveniles. The inadequacies in home and school education substantially increase the risks of mental problems, such as depression, anxiety, and bigotry, in this group (Zhang, 2016).

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It should be acknowledged that not all left-behind children have encountered the said challenges. With the assistance of telecommunication technologies, some of them manage to keep close contact with their parents, perceiving solid parental affection despite the distance between them. Others may benefit from their early left-behind lives, developing strong character and the ability to live independently (Liang, 2020). Still, the majority of them suffer more difficulties than their non-left-behind peers, and some of their difficulties may lead to social problems. That is why the issue of left-behind children has provoked wide attention of Chinese society. To ensure the healthy growth of these children, the Chinese government and numerous third-sector entities have taken action to improve the welfare of this group. In the meantime, many researchers have conducted in-depth studies of the issue of left-behind children and proposed coping strategies. Nevertheless, less attention has been paid to their mental and social development in adulthood. According to Liu and Xu's (2020) research findings, there is a positive correlation between the early left-behind life and adulthood social difficulty. Lai's (2021) study suggests that the early parent-child separation has negative effects on mental health in college students as former left-behind children. The existing literature, though limited, demonstrates the long-term negative impact of childhood left-behind life experience.

Mental Health Issues in Chinese College Students as Former Left-Behind Children: A Literature Review in this issue is a review of 40 prior studies of mental health states of Chinese college students who experienced separation with their migrant worker parents in the early years, aiming to investigate the impact of this childhood life on their mental well-being as adults (Chen, 2025). Despite these college students constituting only a small portion of adults with this left-behind life experience, the article provides a valuable perspective for a comprehensive understanding of its long-term mental health consequences.

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Correspondence to:

Shanshan Wu
Nanjing Dianji Psychological Education Institute
Nanjing 210000
Jiangsu
China

E-mail: 78233525@qq.com

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