

# *Study on the Psychological Health Status of Left-Behind Children in Rural Areas of Dafang County: A Case Study of Y Elementary School*

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**Abstract:** Dafang County, situated in a typical karst region of China, has limited arable land. In the vast rural areas of the county, a large number of surplus laborers have to migrate to the eastern region for work due to various constraints. Unfortunately, most of them have no choice but to leave their children behind, resulting in a significant population of Left-Behind children. These children often suffer from psychological issues due to the prolonged absence of their parents and being stereotyped by the surrounding community, which directly affects their studies and daily lives. To address this issue, this study will utilize case studies and observations. The researchers will interview four rural Left-Behind children from Y Elementary School in Dafang County to identify their psychological problems, analyze the underlying causes, and devise practical solutions to improve their mental health.

## 1. Introduction

Dafang County has a large population of Left-Behind children in its rural areas. As per the data released by the Dafang County Education Bureau, by the end of 2021, there were around 122,400 students enrolled in compulsory education in the county, with Left-Behind children accounting for a significant proportion of 20.7% [1]. Y Elementary School currently has 658 students, out of which 118 are Left-Behind children, comprising 17.9% of the total. Children have a natural attachment to their parents. Howe suggested that attachment behavior is how humans, as biological organisms, adapt to their environment [2]. Through this behavior, children can form close relationships with caregivers and receive their care and affection. However, Left-Behind children cannot receive the love and care of their absent parents, which can result in negative psychological effects like restlessness, anxiety, and fear. The surrounding community often treats these children with negativity and discrimination, further affecting their socialization and healthy development.

## 2. Methods and Sample

The case study and observational methods were employed in this research. Four Left-Behind children in the sixth grade of Y school were selected for interview based on the recommendation of

their homeroom teacher. Homeroom teachers have frequent contact with students and are the ones who understand them best, thus their recommendations are reliable. The psychological states displayed by the four Left-Behind children were inferiority, anxiety, rebellion, and unsociability, and the characteristics of their behavior were noticeable. The specific situations of the four Left-Behind children are presented as shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Basic information about the four interviewees.

Code	Name	Gender	Age	Grade	School	Question type
P1	Student 1	girl	11	Fifth grade	Yuchong Primary school	inferiority
P2	Student 2	girl	11	Fifth grade	Yuchong Primary school	anxiety
P3	Student 3	girl	11	Fifth grade	Yuchong Primary school	rebellion
P4	Student 4	boy	10	Fifth grade	Yuchong Primary school	unsociability

### 3. Problems in Psychological Health of Left-Behind Children in Rural Areas

According to Lin, psychological health is a complex state within an individual that enables them to maintain sustained, efficient, and coordinated functioning in a complex environment [3]. For Left-Behind children, maintaining good psychological health is extremely important, as a positive psychological state can help them to be more outgoing, focused on learning, and to grow up healthy, as well as to adapt and integrate into new communities. However, during the six months that the researcher worked at Yuchong Elementary School and came into contact with a large number of rural Left-Behind children, it was found that some of them suffer from psychological health problems, as evidenced by feelings of inferiority, anxiety, defiance, and unsociability.

**Inferiority:** According to Shen, feelings of inferiority are a negative psychological state that arises from personal experiences of shortcomings, inadequacies, or inferiority [4]. Due to the long-term absence of their parents' care, Left-Behind children may feel abandoned. Over time, they are more likely to develop a sense of inferiority when compared to other children who have their parents present. Left-Behind children feel that they lack the love and attention that other children receive from their parents, which can lead to feelings of depression. At the same time, compared to other children, Left-Behind children's families tend to have lower economic status, resulting in less adequate clothing and food, which further exacerbates their sense of inferiority, making them feel inferior. Once the sense of inferiority is formed, it can exist as a negative emotional experience. Some children may lose their confidence, set lower standards for themselves, and even give up on themselves. This emotional state seriously affects the growth and development of Left-Behind children.

I rarely communicate with my classmates, and I feel very inferior because I have no friends. I think they look down on me and don't want to play with me. Compared to them, I lack family love, and I feel very discouraged. (Student 1).

**Anxiety:** Zhou believed that anxiety is an emotional response to the severe deterioration of the value characteristics of present or future things [5]. Some rural Left-Behind children suffer from psychological anxiety, which is manifested in the following ways: Firstly, anxiety about the external environment. Due to their young age, Left-Behind children are afraid of the complex external environment. They worry that their teachers don't care about them and that their classmates won't pay attention to them. Secondly, when faced with new situations that may arise, Left-Behind

children lack experience in coping, which can cause them to feel extremely anxious and uneasy. For example, various collective activities that the class is about to hold, or specific tasks assigned by the teacher, can make Left-Behind children feel overwhelmed and anxious. Thirdly, grades are an important indicator of a student's performance that teachers and classmates use to measure success. Left-Behind children tend to rank lower in grades, and they want to improve but don't know how, leading to fears of being looked down upon by teachers and classmates. They also worry that poor exam results will lead to criticism from teachers and parents, and even punishment from guardians, causing further psychological anxiety. Prolonged anxiety can lead to difficulty falling asleep, poor sleep quality, poor daytime mental state, and even memory and attention problems, ultimately resulting in declining academic performance.

I feel afraid of the outside world because both my teachers and classmates rarely pay attention to me. I'm afraid of facing unexpected situations that I don't know how to handle. (Student 2).

**Rebellion:** According to Yu, rebellion is a psychological phenomenon where a person's reaction to a situation goes against their own wishes [6]. It is a common psychological phenomenon among school-age children, arising from a strong resistance to situations that conflict with their needs. Children have a strong sense of curiosity about the world around them, and as they grow older, they may form different opinions about social and natural phenomena. When their psychological needs are not met, they may develop a sense of opposition, leading to rebellion. Moreover, if Left-Behind children do not receive attention and recognition from their teachers and classmates for a long time, they may develop feelings of resentment and opposition. Some Left-Behind children may even exhibit behaviors that go against social norms in order to gain attention and express their dissatisfaction.

My grades are poor, so the teacher doesn't like me, and I don't follow her advice. I often do the opposite. At home, I feel like my guardians don't care about me, so I frequently rebel against them. (Student 3).

**Unsociability:** According to Liu, being unsociable refers to having a personality that is solitary, eccentric, and doesn't fit in with the crowd. Those unsociable tend to keep to themselves, feel annoyed with others, and have a guarded or disdainful attitude. Rural Left-Behind children, due to their parents' prolonged absence, tend to be introverted and timid, and often exhibit signs of loneliness and depression. Because they have to rely on themselves to handle many things, they are relatively independent. However, this independence puts them at a disadvantage in terms of communication and interaction with their peers, as well as with their guardians. They prefer to keep their troubles to themselves and deal with them alone. When they encounter problems that they cannot solve, they tend to close themselves off. This lack of a sense of security from a young age contributes to their development of a loner and depressive psychological profile.

I feel so lonely. Teachers, classmates, and even neighbors all treat me differently because I'm a Left-Behind child. They look down on me and avoid me, so I don't really want to talk to them either. (Student 4).

In summary, the psychological state of some rural Left-Behind children is worrying. Left-Behind children are prone to perceive discrimination, feeling that their relatives are indifferent to them, and the group members in their schools discriminate against them, leading to unfair, negative, or harmful treatment. As a result, they exhibit a psychological state of inferiority, anxiety, opposition, and unsociability. Such negative psychological states are very detrimental to the growth and development of Left-Behind children.

#### **4. Causes of Psychological Health Problems of Left-Behind Children**

According to researchers, the main reason for the psychological burden experienced by

Left-Behind children is the discrimination they face from their surrounding community. Left-Behind children are often labeled and seen as problematic by their peers, leading them to feel a sense of indifference and isolation, which can greatly weigh on their mental health.

#### **4.1. Indifference from Teachers**

According to Chen, teachers are the most important support for Left-Behind children [1]. Since Left-Behind children spend most of their time at school, teachers are the most important role models for their growth.

In school, teachers are the ones who have the most contact with Left-Behind children and who can provide them with the most care and support. However, some teachers do not show more care towards Left-Behind children; instead, they view them through a “problem-focused” lens. In China, a teacher’s assessment is mainly based on their students’ test scores, so teachers place a lot of emphasis on their students’ academic performance. They tend to favor high-achieving students and hold negative attitudes towards those who perform poorly. For the latter group, they not only fail to bring honor to the teacher, but they also negatively impact the overall performance of the class. Due to the lack of parental guidance and limited interaction with caregivers at home, Left-Behind children often struggle academically and have poorer grades than their peers. Without anyone to help them with their studies, it is difficult for them to improve their academic performance in the short term. As a result, their lower grades can negatively affect the overall performance of the class and, ultimately, impact the evaluation of teachers by the school administration. Some Left-Behind children may also exhibit disruptive behavior, such as fighting and arguing, due to a lack of discipline at home. Additionally, some may develop a strong rebellious attitude and refuse to listen to their teachers, which can further contribute to negative perceptions of them as “problematic” children. These negative attitudes can have a profound impact on their psychological well-being, causing some to experience fear and others to exhibit rebellious behavior.

#### **4.2. Discrimination by Peers**

Wang believed that peer groups play a very important role in the growth of Left-Behind children. Through interactions with their peers, Left-Behind children can learn social skills and develop healthy psychology by building friendships.

At Y Elementary School, the social interaction of Left-Behind children is poor. Firstly, most of the students in the class are not willing to interact with these children on their own initiative. In school, students tend to associate with those who have excellent academic performance because many students naturally admire these high-achievers and believe that interacting with them will help improve their own grades. At the same time, these students tend to discriminate against those with poorer grades, thinking that associating with them will affect their own academic performance. Since the vast majority of Left-Behind children have poorer grades, they do not meet the standard for students to choose social partners, so most students do not take the initiative to interact with Left-Behind children. Secondly, in class, whether male or female students gather together, they always love to discuss trendy TV or game-related topics. Most Left-Behind children, due to their family’s poverty, are not familiar with these topics and do not have common interests with other students, which makes other students unwilling to interact with them. It’s worth noting that many parents of students have labeled Left-Behind children with negative stereotypes, believing that they are poor performers both academically and behaviorally. These parents advise their own children to stay away from Left-Behind children to avoid being influenced by them, which also contributes to some students discriminating against Left-Behind children and not wanting to interact with them. Lastly, some Left-Behind children exhibit violent behavior, which causes many students to keep

their distance from them in order to avoid harm.

Looking from the perspective of Left-Behind children, some of them are also unwilling to interact with their peers. With their parents absent, they often feel lonely and jealous of classmates whose parents are with them [7]. This jealousy makes them lack the motivation to initiate social interactions. Additionally, they may also feel the discrimination from other students, which hurts their self-esteem and makes them reluctant to approach others.

## 5. Conclusion

The main reason for the psychological problems that arise in Left-Behind children is the discrimination they face from the outside world, which makes them feel fearful and inferior, leading to behaviors such as avoidance and rebellion. Zhao believed that the key to improving the psychological well-being of Left-Behind children is to make them feel supported and loved by the outside world. The researcher suggests taking measures to change the current situation.

To begin with, the current school evaluation system for teachers should be changed. The school uses students' grades as the sole criterion for evaluating teachers. Although this approach can make teachers pay more attention to improving grades, they tend to neglect those students who are performing poorly, many of whom are Left-Behind children. Only by changing the current single evaluation method from focusing on students' grades to evaluating their comprehensive qualities can teachers devote more attention to Left-Behind children. This way, Left-Behind children can receive more care and support, reducing their sense of loneliness.

Additionally, it is important to take measures to improve the academic performance of Left-Behind children as much as possible. By improving their academic performance, they will develop a greater interest in learning, focus more on their studies, and feel more fulfilled. At the same time, improving their academic performance will also change the perception of their peers towards them, reducing discriminatory behaviors. Therefore, improving academic performance is crucial for promoting the psychological well-being of Left-Behind children. Researchers suggest that teachers should take the initiative to provide extra tutoring to Left-Behind children during lunch breaks or after school. When arranging seats in the classroom, teachers can intentionally seat high-performing students next to Left-Behind children and assign them to provide one-on-one help. Schools can also recruit retired teachers through local communities to provide weekend tutoring to Left-Behind children. Through the joint efforts of all parties, the academic performance of Left-Behind children will improve, promoting their psychological development towards a healthier direction.

Finally, it's crucial to promote interaction between Left-Behind children and their peers. Their peer group is a vital social circle for Left-Behind children, and close interaction between the two can help them develop friendships and feel happier. Therefore, teachers should frequently organize various activities and arrange for Left-Behind children to socialize with their peers. Through these interactions, Left-Behind and non-Left-Behind children can get to know each other better, reducing any feelings of exclusion. Teachers can also pair up Left-Behind children who share similar interests with non-Left-Behind children to participate in activities together, enabling them to become good friends. Furthermore, teachers can privately communicate with parents who hold discriminatory attitudes towards Left-Behind children and have deep conversations with them. Through these conversations, they can raise awareness of the vulnerability of Left-Behind children and encourage everyone to care for them. With everyone's help, Left-Behind children can overcome their own shortcomings, so parents should not only refrain from keeping their children away from Left-Behind children but also encourage their children to actively help them grow and develop together.

In conclusion, it's a fact that the psychological health issues of Left-Behind children are real and should be taken seriously. Only when teachers, students, and parents change their discriminatory and negative attitudes towards Left-Behind children and truly accept them, can they feel loved and cared for, and their mental health can improve in a positive direction.

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