

Psychosocial Correlates of Emotional and Behavioral Problems among Intellectually Gifted Children – A Cross-Sectional Study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Giftedness and related aspects of academic skills and intellectual skills has been variously studied in the research literature. Along with such incredible potential, the need to address psychosocial problems and associated psychosocial correlates is inevitable. The aim of the present study was to identify the psychosocial correlates of emotional and behavioral issues among intellectually gifted children using clinical evaluation and the Developmental Psychopathology Checklist (DPCL). **Methods:** The study was in cross-sectional design with a purposive sampling technique. About 25 children of the age range of 11 to 16 years of both sexes were identified as intellectually gifted during the study period (SPM, 95th percentile and above). **Results:** The results of the present study reveal that stress, over-expectation, over-involvement, inconsistent disciplining, and overindulgence tend to be highly significant in intellectually gifted children with externalizing problems such as ADHD and conduct problems over-expectation, over-involvement, indifference and inconsistent disciplining apart from adjustment issues in the family tends to be the significant background variables in intellectually gifted children with internalizing problems such as emotional problems and OC symptoms. **Conclusion:** The explained findings in this study have established the existence of the psychological vulnerabilities in intellectually gifted children and related psychosocial stressors associated with them. The study would benefit in changing the attitudes of the parent toward the child by lowering the parental expectations and stressors and hence encouraging the real potential of gifted children with fewer vulnerabilities.

Keywords: Giftedness, Intelligence, Psychosocial stressors, Emotional problems, Behavioral problems.

Psychosocial factors have a predominant effect on the development of children's talent, temperament and personal growth. The role of family environment, peer group, motivation and social support have a major impact on the achievements in one's life. Obviously, the school and the family have the potential to influence one another, positively or adversely, through the child. Each serves as a context for the child's functioning. In each case, the child is the transmitter of that context to the other. Psychosocial vulnerabilities may also affect the children with high intelligence or very superior children to have emotional and

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behavioral issues during their entire life span. A common myth on the fact that such gifted children would be born enough to cope with such vulnerabilities results in various psychological problems.

Literature on parenting seeks to identify central parental factors associated with children's psychological states and adjustment. Parenting styles that maintain support and bonding with the children by giving them “emotional space” and allowing them to experience and cope with challenges, make the gifted children to achieve optimal adjustment. In fact, copious research on parenting and children's psychological disorders focuses on the elements such as rejection and control. Despite our awareness of the significant effect of parenting on children's mental health, we should also realize that parenting is only one of many sociocultural and biological factors that affect children's mental health. Parenting accounted for 8% of variance in child depression, less than 4% of variance in child anxiety (McLeod, Wood, & Weisz, 2007), and less than 6% of variance in externalizing problems (Rothbaum, & Weisz, 1994). Parental rejection is more strongly related to depression and parental control to anxiety (McLeod, Wood, & Weisz, 2007).

Throughout, the gifted children have substantially been observed to be relatively free of peer acceptance difficulty compared to peers with average IQ, a notable minority of studies show that there are gifted youth who experience problems in peer acceptance and emotional adjustment. Researches from school settings (Gallagher 1964; Kahrs, 1982), from families (Ballering & Koch, 1984; Sebring, 1983), some from prevalence studies on maladjusted populations (Lajoie & Shore, 1981; Schauer, 1976), and some from a more global theoretical approach (Altman, 1983) stated the same.

High levels of parental confidence and an affectionate and respectful family structure enable children to build positive relationships with their peers and others, and both decrease parent-child conflict. The study by Olszewski-Kubilius et al. (2014) revealed that a family environment that was affectionate, supportive and respectful had significant influences on the development of interpersonal abilities and peer relationships for the gifted children. Desperate findings in the literature may serve to obfuscate the clear understanding of the psychological profile, psychosocial vulnerabilities and functioning of gifted individuals. Hence this study aims to evaluate the psychosocial correlates which hinder the mental health of gifted children and thereby providing awareness to society.

Objectives

The aim of the present study was to obtain the profile of psychosocial correlates of emotional and behavioral problems among intellectually gifted adolescents.

The main objectives of the study were:

- To identify the major psychosocial correlates of emotional and behavioral issues among intellectually gifted children using DPCL.
- To explore the distribution of various psychosocial stressors associated with various emotional and behavioral problems in intellectually gifted children.

METHODOLOGY

Research design:

The study was in cross-sectional design with a purposive sampling technique.

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Sample:

About 25 children of the age range of 11 to 16 years of both sexes were identified as intellectually gifted during the study period (SPM, 95th percentile and above) who came to the clinic either directly or referred from other places for management of various mental health issues. The cases presented with the complaints such as deterioration in the study from the past few years, disobedience, anger outbursts, not concentrating in the study, easily being distracted, anxiety and low self-esteem.

Procedure:

The study was conducted for a period of one year from November 2020 to October 2021. Children in the 11–16-year age group who were referred to the research scholar come clinical psychologist for assessment and psychological management, after evaluation by psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, and other clinicians from various clinics during the study period were taken up for the study. Parental consent was taken. The other clinicians referred the children to the scholar with a provisional diagnosis of high intelligence with some behavioral, emotional and social issues. The children who score at or above the 95th percentile on SPM were only considered to be intellectually gifted. Only children in the age range of 11 to 16 years of both sexes were chosen for the study. Children who seeks psychological help for the first time were considered for the study. Those children were excluded from the study who have pervasive developmental disorders. Children with severe visual, auditory, and speech impairments were also excluded. Children who were suggested or undergone other than psychological help like pharmacotherapy were also excluded. The identified children and their parents were interviewed and observed during case history taking and completed the Developmental Psychopathology Checklist (DPCL). Few correlates were selected based on observation/clinical experience of investigators as well as from previous studies. Co-morbidities in the intellectually gifted children were also screened using the DPCL and ICD-10 diagnostic criteria. Hence detailed clinical evaluation was done approximately 2 to 3 hours in duration. The ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board.

RESULTS

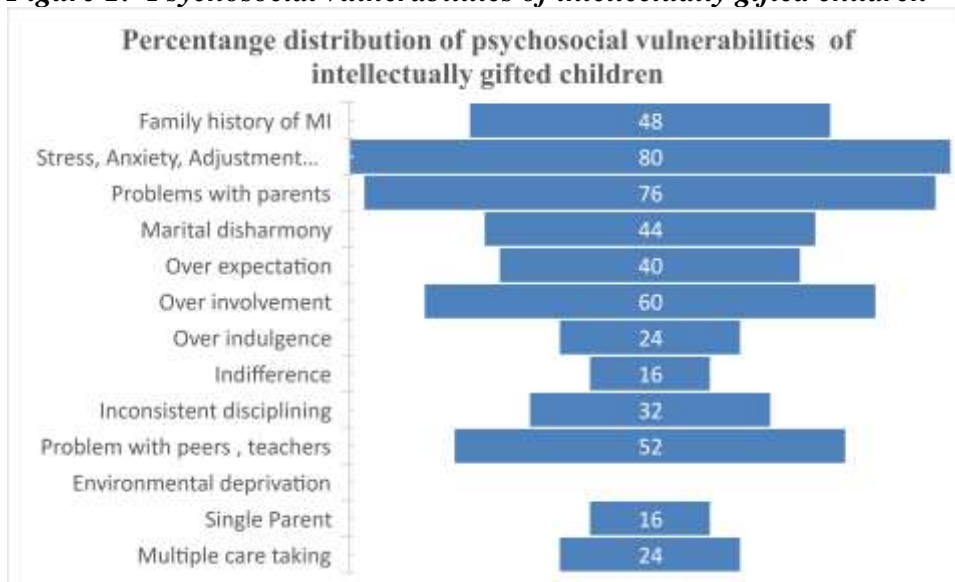
Table 1: Distribution of presence of psychosocial vulnerabilities in intellectually gifted children.

Psychosocial Issues	n	%
Present	22	88
Absent	3	12

Psychosocial stressors are usually associated with increased emotional and behavioral problems in children. In our study also, psychosocial vulnerabilities were present in 88% of intellectually gifted children who had been referred to the scholar.

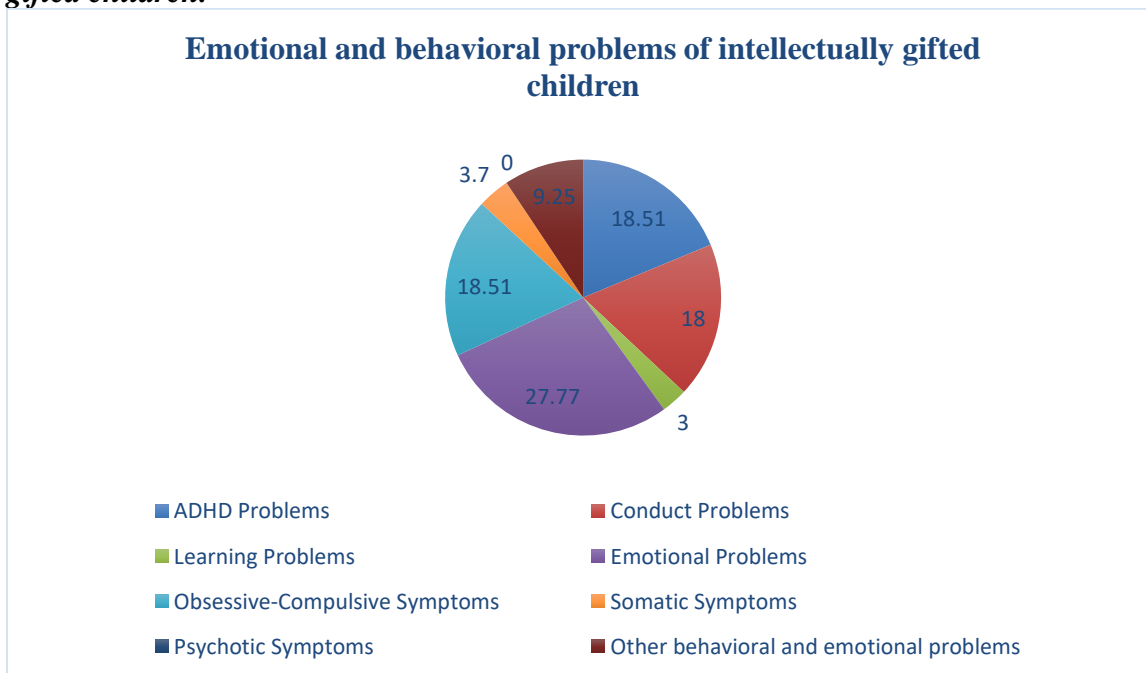
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Figure 1: Psychosocial vulnerabilities of intellectually gifted children



Majority of parents of children with intellectual giftedness had undergone stress, anxiety and adjustment difficulties (80%) in their lives. Most of the children with intellectual giftedness had problems with their parents (76%). About 60% percent of parents are over-involved with children, 40% with over-expectation and overindulgence (24%). About 44% of parents reported having marital disharmony in their marital life. About 32% of parents followed inconsistent disciplining and 16% shows indifference. For about 24% of children were under multiple caretaking. Few of them are in single parenting (16%). Apart from familial constraints, 52% of children reported having problems with peers, teachers and the school setting. None of them commented on environmental deprivation as a stressful factor.

Figure 2: Percentage distribution of emotional and behavioral problems of intellectually gifted children.



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Findings on the Psychopathology checklist reveal that about 50 % of the children with intellectual giftedness clustered under the category of internalizing problems such as emotional problems (27.77%), obsessive-compulsive symptoms (18.51%) and somatic symptoms, and neurotic kind (3.70%). About 40 % of children with intellectual giftedness tend to have externalizing problems with ADHD problems (18.51%), conduct problems (18%), and learning problems (3.70%). About 9.25% of children have certain behavioral and emotional problems with not amounting to any specific cluster. None were ascribed under the cluster of psychosis. (Figure 2)

Table 2: Frequency and percentage distribution of various psychosocial stressors associated with various emotional and behavioral problems in intellectually gifted children.

Emotional & behavioral problems	ADHD	Conduct Problems	Learning Problems	Emotional Problems	OC Symptoms	Somatic Symptoms
Psychosocial stressors	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)
Family MI	4(16%)	4(16%)	0	7(28%)	6(24%)	2(8%)
Stress, anxiety and adjustment problems	6(24%)	7(28%)	1(4%)	14(56%)	8(32%)	2(8%)
Problem with parents	5(20%)	8(32%)	2(8%)	11(44%)	9(36%)	2(8%)
Marital disharmony	5(20%)	4(16%)	1(4%)	6(24%)	5(20%)	2(8%)
Over expectation	3(12%)	4(16%)	1(4%)	7(28%)	6(24%)	2(8%)
Overinvolvement	6(24%)	5(20%)	2(8%)	8(32%)	9(36%)	2(8%)
Overindulgence	3(12%)	4(16%)	1(4%)	3(12%)	2(8%)	2(8%)
Indifference	2(8%)	0	0	2(8%)	1(4%)	1(4%)
Inconsistent disciplining	3(12%)	6(24%)	0	4(16%)	2(8%)	0
Problem with peers, teachers	5(20%)	6(24%)	2(8%)	8(32%)	2(8%)	1(4%)
Single parent	2(8%)	2(8%)	0	0	0	1(4%)
Multiple caretaking	2(8%)	0	0	2(8%)	0	2(8%)

Results reveal that the children with ADHD problems had significant background variables such as overinvolvement of parents (24%), stress and adjustment problems (24%), problems with parents (20%), problems with peers and teachers (20%), marital disharmony among parents (20%), family histories of mental illness like mental retardation and Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPD) in the parent (16%). Other correlates such as overindulgence (12%), inconsistent disciplining (12%) and single parenting (8%) also compromised to hyperactive problems. The significant psychosocial stressors in conduct problems were problems with parents (32%), inconsistent disciplining (12%), problems with peers and teachers (24%), overinvolvement (20%) and adjustment issues (28%). Learning problems seem to have less significant stressors. There are significant psychosocial vulnerabilities in emotional problems. The significant background variables were the presence of stress and adjustment problems (56%), the problem with parents (44%), overinvolvement

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(32%), over-expectation(28%), inconsistent disciplining and overindulgence of parents(12%). The children with OC symptoms also reveal the above parenting-related issues such as problems with parents (36%), over involvement (36%), family history of mental illness (24%), and marital disharmony (20%) and over-expectation (24%). The presence of psychosocial stressors in somatic symptoms is also revealed. (Table 2)

Table 3: Sociodemographic variables of children and parents.

Age (yrs)	Frequency	Percentage
11-13	8	24
14-16	17	76
Gender		
M	12	48
F	13	52
Syllabus		
State	6	24
CBSE	18	72
ICSE	1	4
Residence		
U	13	52
R	12	48
Class		
6 th	3	12
7 th	2	8
8 th	1	4
9 th	4	16
10 th	6	24
11 th	9	36
Previous assessment		
Yes	4	16
No	21	84
Source of referral		
Parents	21	84
Teachers	4	16
Family		
Joint	9	36
Nuclear	16	64
Ordinal Position		
Firstborn	15	60
Second born	5	20
Single born	5	20
Educational level of father		
Primary	0	0
High School	2	8
Graduation	15	64
Post-graduation and above	9	28
Educational level of mother		
Primary	0	0

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High School	2	8
Graduation	15	60
Post-graduation and above	8	32
Employment status of Father		
Unskilled labor	1	4
Skilled labor	11	40
Professional	14	56
Employment status of Mother		
Unskilled labor	1	4
Skilled labor	4	16
Professional	8	32
Unemployed	12	48

Children in the age group 14-16yrs were the majority (76%). Females (52%) outnumbered males (48%). Majority were from CBSE standards (72%). More were from rural areas (52%). More than half of the children were from high school (80%) with 60% of 10th and 11th standard students. Previous assessment and management were done only in 16% of children. About 84% were self-referred by parents and the rest by teachers (16%). Most of the children belong to the nuclear family (64%). About 60% of children were firstborns, followed by 2nd born (20%) and single born (20%). About 64% of fathers of intellectually gifted children were educated up to graduation followed by post-graduation/above (28%) and high school (8%). About 60% of mothers were educated up to graduation (60%) followed by post-graduation and above (32%) and high school (8%). About 56% of fathers of such children are employed as professionals followed by skilled labor (40%) and unskilled labor (4%). About 48% of mothers were housewives, followed by professionals (32%), skilled labour (16%) and unskilled labor (4%). (Table 3)

DISCUSSION

The study examined the psychosocial correlates of various emotional and behavioral issues which might hinder the mental health of intellectually gifted children. Though the study does not fit into the association between psychosocial correlates and problem behaviors, the findings are valid enough to assess the prevalence and background variables associated with such a group. The findings would be discussed under five headings: interactions within the family, child-rearing practices, child's relationships with parents and siblings, relationships in the school setting, mental health and parenting.

Interactions within the family

By analyzing the influence of the family context on the development of gifted children, it is clear that the adoption of a contextual approach to investigate how family context variables are associated with the development of such children (Manzano and Arranz, 2008). Our findings also reveal the interaction pattern in the family system. In our study, parents were a good source of referral to clinics for identifying psychological problems in children. In the study by Pilarinos & Solomon (2017), the mothers were found to describe more child conduct problems than the teachers did. Previous management was not done for the majority of children. The teachers might be more persistent in the academic achievement of the child and unknowingly lack the mental health aspects. The children from nuclear families were more affected by such issues. In our study, about 60% of children were firstborns, followed by 2nd born (20%) and single born (20%). More gifted children of firstborn are profiled for emotional

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and behavioral problems. Margot & Rinn (2016) also stated that families of the gifted who were only or firstborn children had higher expectations and these children experienced higher levels of anxiety about making a mistake. The clinic-based data results in providing more educated and professionally qualified parents with appropriate financial sound. And approaching for psychological help may not be a stigma among the group while comparing to other economic levels. Marital disharmony and personality predispositions in parents were reported to be highly significant in our study. According to the model developed by Arranz (2005), family context variables can be classified as ecological or interactive. The ecological perspective emphasizes the settings in which development occurs, such as socioeconomic status or parental age which influence the quality of the interaction but do not show a direct interaction between family members. On the other hand, the interactive perspective suggests specific interaction modes, day to day, among family members, such as, educational styles of parents, lifestyle and family type, the presence of conflicts between parents or among siblings, the type of relationship established by the children with their peers, the support, stimulation and family cohesion. The present results contribute to the research field by revealing important relationships between specific constructs that have been suggested by personality, family cohesion, understanding between parents and children and their lifestyle that might affect mental health.

Child-rearing practices

Findings of the study reveal that 76% of children with intellectual giftedness have problems with their parents. Most of the parents are overinvolved in adolescents' personal lives and demand them to move with their parents' expectations. Few parents seem to be overly expected beyond the adolescent's interests and talent; some of them were inconsistent in disciplining. Over-expectation (the parents expect from the child beyond his/her abilities/interests), over-involvement (the parents are involved with all the child's activities to the extent that he/she does not do anything on his/her own) and overindulgence (the parents meet all the demands of the child, whether reasonable or not) are clear-cut indications of the authoritarian parenting style in which parents are rearing the adolescent. Copious research on parenting points to three major categories of parenting factors influencing children's mental health. Some researchers focussing on authoritarian or controlling parenting found that authoritarian parenting was associated with children's psychological problems, while other researchers found it associated with better psychological adjustment (Belsky et al., 2000). Still, other researchers found minor or no significant association between authoritarian parenting and children's mental health (Dwairy et al., 2006). Our findings are consistent with the study by Baumrind (2005) results that the authoritarian parenting style is a crucial factor that influences the well-being of gifted children and may affect their mental health. Authoritarian parents emphasize control and obedience, enforce discipline via punishment, and expect children to obey their orders without arguing (Baumrind, 2005). The findings of Dwairy, 2010 had shown cross-gender differences in parenting practices and in the association between parenting (control and rejection) and children's psychological states.

About 12% of children with intellectual giftedness have no specific psychosocial stressors during the tenure of study though they were experiencing anxiety, mild depression, re-reading and slowness in their works, aches and anger outbursts. Temperamental factors were not elicited here. Qualitative analysis reveals that few of them have adequate social support and parental acceptance in their lives where they are using it as coping strategies and hence treatment modality tends to be much better. Coopersmith (1967) considered three conditions important for developing high levels of self-esteem: parental acceptance of the child, parental

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enforcement of clearly defined limits, and parental respect and freedom for the child to engage in self-initiated behaviors within these limits. Similarly, the parents who followed the nonauthoritarian discipline (Fine, 1977) and who encouraged freedom to engage in self-initiated behaviors (Colangelo & Dettmann, 1983) and diverse interests (Fine, 1977; Colangelo & Dettmann, 1983) fostered healthy parent-child interactions.

Child's relationships with parents and siblings

The influence of giftedness on the family system has been studied by few researchers. (Thiel & Thiel, 1977; Ross, 1979; Peterson, 1977) Peterson (1977) identified four ways in which the presence of a gifted child can affect the family: competition among family members; sibling jealousy; insensitivity to each member's unique sense of giftedness; and lack of respect for each member's differences. The competition among family members and lack of respect for others' differences may lead to indifference (the parents are not bothered about child's physical or psychological needs) in the parenting and caretaking of such children. Moreover, stress, adjustment and anxiety issues among parents may compensate to indifference in parenting. About 16% of children with intellectual giftedness reported indifference in parenting and 44% of parents are in marital disharmony. Ross (1979) hypothesized that the degree to which the gifted child has an impact on the family is directly related to the degree of discrepancy between the gifted child's intellectual capacity and that of other family members.

Relationships in school setting

Peer rejection is another stressor that gifted children found to be problematic to move on. This immaturity also affects the gifted child who may not appreciate peers who are different. (Hackney, 1981) About 52 % of adolescents have problems with either teachers or peers. Qualitative findings revealed that they were ignored by peers at times, behave indifferently towards their extra skills or thought process, and felt socially isolated. The findings are consistent with the results of Pilarinos & Solomon (2017), that 39,6% of the gifted children were reported by their parents as having social problems with their peers. Similarly, Morawska & Sanders (2008), concluded that gifted children were more likely to experience emotional problems and to have difficulty with peer relationships.

Mental health and parenting

Results show that clinically referred intellectually gifted children display significant and varied behavioral and emotional problems. The most common health problem in gifted children was emotional problems with a rate of 50%. Emotional problems such as worrying, anxiety, crying easily, being withdrawn, talking little and being timid were higher in such children. Morawska & Sanders (2008) similarly indicated that the gifted children were more likely to experience emotional problems. The result is also consistent with the findings of Koren, L, 1990 which suggest the presence of social and emotional problems in a group of gifted with an IQ of 120 or more.⁽²⁴⁾ The results also confirm with the findings of Dirkes, 1993 that anxiety might be more prevalent among gifted children which may accumulate and become more manifest during adolescence.⁽²⁵⁾ Obsessive-compulsive features such as rereading, preoccupied with perfectionism, excessive nature of following rules which results in slowness while performing exams or other tasks, difficulty in completing it, fear of failure, loss of interest in activities, excessive worry, anxiety and conflict with self and others were reported to be present in gifted children. The findings were consistent with the results of Margolis, 2006 that gifted children have a tendency for perfectionism and self-criticism.⁽²⁶⁾ A study by Guignard et.al (2012) and Kramer (1987) also concluded that anxiety and

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perfectionism seems to be the outcome of high ability group. Mofield & Peters (2015) concluded that perfectionism propelled the child to guilt, shame, self-criticism and to reach higher levels of success. As the age increased, the perfectionism also increased. Few reported somatic and neurotic kind of features like dizziness, headache and fainting spells and stomach aches.^(7,27) Beauchaine & Hinshaw, 2013 reported that there is high prevalence of disruptive behaviour problems across children with giftedness (ODD ranges from 1% to 20% and Conduct disorder ranges from 1% to 10%).⁽²⁸⁾ Our study also concluded with the prevalence rate of approximately 18% conduct features and ADHD features among gifted children.

Psychosocial vulnerabilities had a major impact on mental health of adolescents. The literature on these factors maintains that authoritarian and permissive (Baumrind), hostile and detached (Schaefer), and rejecting parenting (Rohner) have a negative impact on children's psychological adjustment. Whatever the parenting style, the author suggests inconsistency and incoherent parenting as another important factor associated with children's psychological disorders (Dwairy, 2007; Dwairy, Achoui, Abouserie, & Farah, 2006). Similarly, perceived rejection is a major parental factor that is associated with several personality dispositions. Adolescents' reports of higher parental rejection explain 27%– 46% of the variance in their reports about psychological adjustment (Kim, Cain, & McCubbin, 2006). Dwairy et al, 2013 concluded that 57% of fathers and 21% of mothers who exhibited the low guidance-high control profile (LG-HC), was associated with psychological disorders and 31% of mothers who displayed the high guidance-high control profile (HG-HC), were also associated with psychological disorders.

Majority of the literature focused on such vulnerabilities with less review on high intelligence. Recent studies had vast findings on psychosocial correlates of gifted children. Our findings reveal that problem with parents, marital disharmony among parents, over-expectation, over-involvement, inconsistent disciplining, indifference and overindulgence had high prevalence over other psychosocial vulnerabilities in gifted children. The stress, over-expectation, over-involvement, inconsistent disciplining, and overindulgence tend to be highly significant in intellectually gifted children with externalizing problems such as ADHD and conduct problems. Few kinds of research on parenting supported the findings; parenting accounted for 6% of the variance in externalizing problems (Rothbaum, & Weisz, 1994). Dadds (1995) reports an association between inconsistent parenting and conduct disorders, and Patterson's coercion model (1982) links inconsistent parenting with conduct disorders. Similarly, in our study high over expectation, over-involvement, indifference and inconsistent disciplining apart from adjustment issues in the family tend to be the significant background variables in intellectually gifted children with internalizing problems such as emotional problems and OC symptoms. Family history of OCPD is also reported in the maternal parent. In a meta-analysis study, parenting accounted for 8% of the variance in child depression and less than 4% of the variance in child anxiety (McLeod, Wood, & Weisz, 2007). Also stated that parental rejection is related to depression and parental control is more related to anxiety.

The above-discussed findings were a prevalence study rather than an association between psychosocial factors and mental health problems in gifted children. But the profiles are relevant to understanding the perspective of children and parents regarding their parenting and psychological states. We would like to suggest two viewpoints on it: guiding parenting which includes acceptance, loving control, and rational control, which were the dominant factors among both fathers and mothers and were associated with better psychological states and controlling parenting which includes compassion evoking, love withdrawal, inconsistent

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parenting, and authoritarian parenting, which were less dominant and were associated with psychological disorders.

CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the prevalence of psychosocial correlates of emotional and behavioral problems among intellectually gifted children. Children experience rapid physical, cognitive and psychosocial growth. This affects how they feel, think, make decisions, and interact with the world around them. The present study was a rare one to study the interplay between these variables in the intellectually gifted children of Kerala community. Yet another uniqueness of this study is that the sample was gifted students who were usually expected to be well-adjusted and less psychological issues. The results of this study have established the existence of the psychological vulnerabilities in intellectually gifted children and related psychosocial stressors associated with them. The explained findings in this study conclude that the stress, over-expectation, over-involvement, inconsistent disciplining, and overindulgence tend to be highly significant in intellectually gifted children with externalizing problems such as ADHD and conduct problems and high over expectation, over-involvement, indifference and inconsistent disciplining apart from adjustment issues in the family tends to be the significant background variables in intellectually gifted children with internalizing problems such as emotional problems and OC symptoms.

Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting the results of our study. The first one is the definition of giftedness on a single basis of high IQ with SPM as it specifically focusing one domain, nonverbal reasoning. Secondly, the study is a purely private clinic-based data resource and hence most children are from middle to high socioeconomic status, the majority are from the CBSE syllabus and their parents seem to be highly professional. Parents of low socioeconomic status and from state syllabus of vernacular language might be unaware of children's emotional concerns or might be going to government health sectors for psychological help. Another limitation of the study is the absence of a control group to determine the prevalence rate of psychological problems among children. This is a clinic-based study from the Thrissur district. Hence, the results cannot be generalized to all the gifted children with psychological issues specifically in the school setting. Even though the study focused on the psychosocial correlates of mental health issues among such children it would not predict the association between both variables. Lastly, the study does not look into any association between various psychosocial stressors with various psychological problems among gifted children.

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Conflict of Interest

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