

## Emotional and Behavioural Problems in Left-Behind Children and Perceived Maternal Parenting Styles

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### ABSTRACT

Over 2 million children are left behind by the emigrant household under the care of a single parent or under the care of relatives. Parenting stress and child behavior feed each other, creating a vulnerability in children to develop emotional and behavioural issues. In Kerala, with over 2 million left-behind children, parenting is carried out primarily by the non-migrant mothers who reside with the children in their home country when their husbands migrated in order to provide for their families. The aim of the study is to examine the relationship between perceived maternal parenting styles and the emotional and behavioural problems in left-behind children.

**Keywords:** Parenting Style, Authoritarian, Authoritative, permissive, uninvolved, emotional, behavioural, peer problem, Prosocial, Behavioral parent training

Moving in search of green pastures for one's livelihood is not always a smooth trip but a road full of unexpectedness and distress that may be strong enough to take a toll on the emotional and psychological wellbeing of the children that are left – behind in the process. Migration negatively affects the family structure as well as the parent-child relationships. As per NORKA, there are approximately 4 million Keralite outside the country as emigrants. Over 2 million children are left behind by the emigrant household under the care of a single parent or under the care of relatives.

The single parent who is shouldering the additional responsibilities and management of the household in the absence of their spouse is at more risk of exhibiting inconsistent parenting styles that may negatively influence the child's behavior.

The identification of parenting behaviors as key predictors of the development and maintenance of externalizing behaviors in children led to the development of behavioural parent training programs (e.g., McMahon & Forehand, 2003). This study is expected to have a preventive aspect of leading to effective parental training that would help children to be mentally healthy and productive individuals as they grow up. Children are to be screened for the risk factors at the right time and preventive measures are to be taken. As per social learning theory, skills are taught, and behavioural training could be effective for parenting

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## Emotional and Behavioural Problems in Left-Behind Children and Perceived Maternal Parenting Styles

skills training using appropriate reinforcements and rewards, for changing the maladaptive parenting styles.

Baumrind (1966) identified three different parenting styles that could result in different outcomes in child development that vary in the degree of parental control and parental support and warmth: (1) Authoritative (2) Authoritarian, and (3) Permissive or Indulgent. Later Maccoby and Martin (1983) expanded the parenting style to include the dimensions of demandingness and responsiveness, thus framing the fourth style, the Neglectful or uninvolved parenting style.

The authoritative style of parenting promotes positive social development and the development of general competencies for dealing with others and their environments (Baumrind, 1993; Simmons et al., 2005). Children reared by parents with an authoritative style are less likely to exhibit emotional disorders (e.g., anxiety and depression) or behavioural problems (e.g., conduct problems and delinquency) (Williams et al., 2009). Authoritarian parenting is associated with a high degree of Behavioral and psychological control and low warmth. Their children tend to be conflicted, irritable, and moody (Baumrind, 1993; Siegler et al., 2003).

If severe disciplinary measures in the form of physical punishment are used as opposed to the withdrawal of approval and privileges, such children may show increased aggressive behavior (Berk, 2003). Permissive or indulgent parenting is associated with a higher degree of warmth and low behavioural and psychological control. Overly indulged children are characteristically spoiled, selfish, impatient, inconsiderate, and demanding (Baumrind, 1971, 1975). Neglectful or involved parenting shows a lower degree of both control and warmth and is associated with a disruption in attachment during early childhood (Egeland & Sroufe, 1981) and problems with peer relations.

### *Need and Significance*

Several researchers have studied the relation between parenting styles and the internalizing and externalizing behaviors in children. However, there are no sufficient studies in this regard done within the state of Kerala and its relation to all four parenting styles. This study is expected to have a preventive aspect of leading to effective parental training to promote effective parenting techniques that would help children to be mentally healthy and productive individuals as they grow up. This study covers correlation of the internalizing and externalizing issues with all the four parenting styles and is a novel approach unlike previous studies covering only three parenting styles authoritarian, authoritative and permissive. The identification of parenting behaviors is a key predictor in the behaviors of children, this study opens a channel for behavioural intervention focusing on effective parenting skills.

## **METHODOLOGY**

*Sample size:* The sample size of the study is 66.

*Table 3.1 Break-up of the sample based on Gender*

<b>Gender</b>	<b>No of respondents</b>
Male	38
Female	28

## Emotional and Behavioural Problems in Left-Behind Children and Perceived Maternal Parenting Styles

**Table 3.2 Break-up of the sample based on type of family**

Type of family	No of respondents
Nuclear	48
Joint	18

**Table 3.3 Break-up of the sample based on the area of living**

Area of living	No of respondents
Urban	51
Rural	15

**Population:** The sample of the study consists of 66 adolescents (38 males and 28 females) between the age group 11-17 years, and whose father is working abroad and are under the care of the non-migrant parent. Purposive sampling method has been adopted as there are only limited samples that would represent the primary data source of the study. 66 students who fulfilled the inclusion criteria of the study and were selected from the schools in Ernakulum district solely based on the inclusion criteria.

Purposive sampling, also known as Subjective or judgemental or selective sampling, which is a non-probability sampling method in which the researcher has depended upon her own judgment in sample selection to suit the objective and context of the study.

### **Questionnaires**

Adolescent Parenting Attitude Four Factor Questionnaire (APA-FFQ) (Shyny, 2017) is used to measure adolescents' attitudes towards their parents. The questionnaire consists of 40 items and adolescents are required to respond on the five-point scale as all of the time, most of the time, sometimes, rarely, and never. The score is five to one. There are no negative items. Scores for each parenting style were taken separately and the sum of scores of each parent was taken for the overall score of an item. Thus, the instrument yields four separate scores for each participant, namely Authoritarian or Authoritative, Permissive, Uninvolved, etc.

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ(S) (11-17) (Goodman, Meltzer, & Bailey, 1998) is used to measure Emotional and behavioural problems in adolescents and children. The version used is the baseline version of Youth Report Measures for Children and Adolescents SDQ(S)11-17. It is a brief screening questionnaire for emotional and behavioural problems consisting, with versions available for administration on children between the age of 3-17 years. All versions consist of 25 attributes, some are positive and some are negative. 25 items are divided into emotional, conduct, hyperactivity, peer problem and prosocial scales. Internalizing problems comprise emotional and peer symptoms ( 10 items) and externalizing issues comprise conduct and hyperactivity symptoms ( Goodman et al, 2010). The 25 items are divided into emotional, conduct, hyperactivity, peer problem and prosocial scales. Internalizing problems comprise emotional and peer symptoms ( 10 items) and externalizing issues comprise conduct and hyperactivity symptoms ( Goodman et al, 2010). The questionnaire also consists of an impact supplement that checks if the subject has any difficulties in the area of emotions, concentration, behavior, or being able to get on with other people. It also has questions pertaining to distress level, chronicity, the burden to others, and social environment.

## Emotional and Behavioural Problems in Left-Behind Children and Perceived Maternal Parenting Styles

### Objective

The aim of the study is to examine the relationship between perceived maternal parenting styles and the emotional and behavioural problems in left-behind children.

### Hypothesis

1. There exists no relationship between perceived maternal parenting styles and emotional and behavioural problems in left-behind children.
2. There exists no significant gender (male and female) based difference between perceived maternal parenting styles and emotional and behavioural problems in left-behind children.
3. There exists no significant difference based on the area of living (Urban and Rural) between perceived maternal parenting styles and emotional and behavioural problems in left-behind children.
4. There exists no significant difference based on the type of family (Nuclear and joint) between perceived maternal parenting styles and emotional and behavioural problems in left-behind children.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between perceived maternal parenting styles and emotional and behavioural problems in left-behind children. Data were collected from 66 school children (38 boys & 28 girls), between the age group of 11-17 years and whose father has been working abroad and living away from the child for at least 6 months and are under the care of a non-migrant parent (mother) in their home country. The researcher used the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Professional version 21.0 to analyse the data.

**Table 4.1 Pearson correlation coefficient between parenting styles and strength and difficulty variables (n=66)**

Variables	Authoritarian	Authoritative	Permissive	Uninvolved
Emotional scale	.110	-.382**	-.012	.336**
Conduct Problem Scale	.405**	-.299**	.214**	.375**
Hyperactivity Scale	.215	-.387**	-.158	.294*
Peer Problem Scale	.289*	-.342**	.092	.303*
Prosocial Scale	-.254*	.165	-.133	-.358**
SDQ Total Difficulties Score	.319**	-.479**	.022	.437**

\*sig at .05 level

\*\*sig at .01 level

As per Table 4.1, we can infer that the Emotional scale has a negative correlation with authoritative parenting ( $r = -.382$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and a positive correlation with uninvolved parenting ( $r = .336$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Interestingly a positive correlation with authoritarian and negative correlation with permissive parenting is noted, however it is not statistically significant.

Conduct problem scale shows a positive correlation with Authoritarian parenting ( $r = .405$ ,  $p < .01$ ), a negative correlation with Authoritative parenting ( $r = -.299$ ,  $p < .01$ ), a positive correlation with Permissive parenting ( $r = .214$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and uninvolved parenting ( $r = .375$ ,  $p < .01$ ). It is to be noted that conduct problem scale is significant for all the four parenting styles. Even though the authoritative parenting style is statistically significant, it is negatively correlated with conduct problems.

## Emotional and Behavioural Problems in Left-Behind Children and Perceived Maternal Parenting Styles

In the case of the Hyperactivity Scale, it can be seen that a negative correlation with Authoritative parenting ( $r = -.387, p < .01$ ) which is statistically significant but it shows a positive correlation with Uninvolved parenting ( $r = .294, p < .01$ ) which is statistically significant. In the case of authoritarian parenting style, it is positively correlated, which is statistically insignificant but it is negatively correlated with permissive parenting style, which is also statistically insignificant.

In Peer Problem scale, it shows a positive correlation with Authoritarian parenting ( $r = .289, P < .05$ ) and uninvolved parenting ( $r = .303, p < .05$ ) which are statistically significant. But it shows a negative correlation with Authoritative parenting ( $r = -.342, p < .01$ ) and it is statistically significant. It shows a positive correlation with permissive parenting, however, it is not statistically significant.

When considering the variable prosocial scale, it shows a negative correlation with Authoritarian parenting ( $r = -.254, p < .05$ ) and with Uninvolved parenting ( $r = -.358, P < .01$ ). But it shows a positive Correlation with authoritative parenting, however it is not statistically significant.

Strength and difficulties total score shows positive correlation with Authoritarian parenting ( $r = .319, p < .01$ ), negative correlation with Authoritative parenting ( $r = -.479, p < .01$ ) and positive correlation with Uninvolved parenting ( $r = .437, p < .01$ )

**Table 4.2 Mean, SD, and t-values of Perceived parenting styles on emotional and behavioural problems based on gender**

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-values	Sig.
Emotional Scale	Male	38	2.34	1.977	2.750**	.008
	Female	28	3.82	2.389		
Conduct Problem Scale	Male	38	2.84	1.653	.141	.889
	Female	28	2.79	1.548		
Hyperactivity Scale	Male	38	4.03	1.924	.850	.399
	Female	28	4.46	2.252		
Peer Problem Scale	Male	38	2.47	1.484	.324	.747
	Female	28	2.36	1.393		
Prosocial Scale	Male	38	7.53	1.797	1.037	.304
	Female	28	8.00	1.886		
SDQ Total Difficulties Score	Male	38	11.68	5.302	1.281	.205
	Female	28	13.43	5.686		
SDQ impact Score	Male	38	1.21	2.016	.637	.527
	Female	28	1.54	2.099		
Authoritarian	Male	38	22.24	7.488	1.299	.199
	Female	28	19.86	7.174		
Authoritative	Male	38	37.24	7.077	.163	.871
	Female	28	36.96	6.227		
Permissive	Male	38	26.92	5.064	1.074	.287
	Female	28	25.54	5.330		
Uninvolved	Male	38	19.13	6.846	.037	.970
	Female	28	19.07	6.024		

\*\*Sig at .01 level

## Emotional and Behavioural Problems in Left-Behind Children and Perceived Maternal Parenting Styles

As per Table 4.2, we see significant differences only in the emotional scale among male participants ( $t = 2.75$ ,  $p < .01$ ). No significant difference noted in any other variables.

**Table 4.3 Mean, SD, and t-values of Perceived parenting styles on emotional and behavioural problems based on Type of Family.**

	Type of family	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Sig.
Emotional Scale	nuclear	48	3.02	2.374	.297	.767
	joint	18	2.83	2.007		
Conduct Problem Scale	nuclear	48	2.65	1.451	1.443	
	joint	18	3.28	1.904		.154
Hyperactivity Scale	nuclear	48	4.33	1.971	.777	.440
	joint	18	3.89	2.324		
Peer Problem Scale	nuclear	48	2.50	1.305	.697	.488
	joint	18	2.22	1.768		
Prosocial Scale	nuclear	48	7.60	1.899	-.888	.378
	joint	18	8.06	1.662		
SDQ Total Difficulties Score	nuclear	48	12.50	5.387	.182	.857
	joint	18	12.22	5.927		
SDQ Impact Score	nuclear	48	1.10	1.704	1.607	.113
	joint	18	2.00	2.701		
Authoritarian	nuclear	48	20.63	7.034	-1.082	.283
	joint	18	22.83	8.284		
Authoritative	nuclear	48	37.29	6.940	.336	.738
	joint	18	36.67	6.097		
Permissive	nuclear	48	25.38	4.871	2.555*	.013
	joint	18	28.89	5.257		
Uninvolved	nuclear	48	18.92	6.562	-.386	.701
	joint	18	19.61	6.344		

\*sig at .05 levels

As per Table 4.3, We see significant differences only in the Permissive parenting among participants belonging to nuclear families ( $t = 2.555$ ,  $p < .05$ ). No significant difference is noted except in Permissive parenting style.

**Table 4.4 Mean, SD, and t-values of Perceived parenting styles on emotional and behavioural problems based on Geographical region.**

	Geographical Region	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-values	Sig.
Emotional scale	Urban	51	3.45	2.129	3.435**	.001
	Rural	15	1.33	1.988		
Conduct Problem Scale	Urban	51	2.96	1.574	1.346	.183
	Rural	15	2.33	1.633		
Hyperactivity Scale	Urban	51	4.39	2.117	1.314	.194
	Rural	15	3.60	1.805		
Peer Problem Scale	Urban	51	2.43	1.540	.074	.941
	Rural	15	2.40	1.056		
Prosocial Scale	Urban	51	7.78	1.781	.463	.645
	Rural	15	7.53	2.066		

## Emotional and Behavioural Problems in Left-Behind Children and Perceived Maternal Parenting Styles

		Geographical Region	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-values	Sig.
SDQ Difficulties Score	Total	Urban	51	13.24	5.476	2.282*	.026
		Rural	15	9.67	4.746		
SDQ impact Score		Urban	51	1.43	1.942	.605	.547
		Rural	15	1.07	2.404		
Authoritarian		Urban	51	20.86	7.416	.736	.465
		Rural	15	22.47	7.444		
Authoritative		Urban	51	37.08	6.684	.095	.924
		Rural	15	37.27	6.902		
Permissive		Urban	51	26.24	5.136	.281	.779
		Rural	15	26.67	5.512		
Uninvolved		Urban	51	18.59	5.787	1.205	.233
		Rural	15	20.87	8.365		

\*sig at .05 levels

\*\*sig at .01 levels

As per Table 4.4, we can see significant difference only in the Emotional scale in participants belonging to Urban region ( $t=3.435$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and significant difference noted in Difficulty total score in participants from urban region ( $t= 2.282$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The mean value also indicates the higher Emotional problems in urban regions compared to rural regions.

### **Result findings**

The goal of the study was to examine the influence of perceived maternal parenting styles on the emotional and behavioural problems of left behind children. The correlational research design was used to test the hypothesis and conducted paired sample t-tests to compare the difference between the groups, at different levels of independent variables, Urban & Rural, Nuclear & Joint, male & female, etc.

The statistical analysis shows that the children of parents with authoritarian parenting style show conduct problems, peer problems and emotional and behavioural difficulties and for the authoritarian parenting style, low prosocial behaviour is noted.

Authoritative parenting is associated negatively with emotional and behavioural problems such as emotional, conduct problem, hyperactivity and peer problems. A positive correlation is evident between the prosocial scale and authoritative parenting; however, the correlation was statistically insignificant. Total score of the difficulties has been found to be low in children who perceived their mother as authoritative. Permissive and Uninvolved parenting style has been associated with conduct problems. Uninvolved parenting style is seen to be associated with behavioural problems such as conduct, hyperactivity and peer problem. Children raised by mothers with uninvolved parenting style scored low on prosocial behaviour and high on difficulties.

## **DISCUSSION**

The aim of the study was to examine the influence of perceived maternal parenting style and emotional and behavioural problems in left-behind children. The study highlights the influence of perceived maternal styles on the emotional and behavioural problems of left-behind children in Ernakulum district in the context of migration of father figure, which is also a contributory factor to inconsistent parenting style of the single mothers.

## **Emotional and Behavioural Problems in Left-Behind Children and Perceived Maternal Parenting Styles**

The results of the study show that authoritarian parenting is associated with externalising problems such as conduct, Hyperactivity, peer problems and contributes to greater difficulties in children. It was also noted that children who perceived their mothers as authoritarian showed less prosocial behaviours.

Motherhood is an important change in identity that comes with a variety of responsibilities. This normative life task itself is stressful especially considering the dual roles handled by wives whose husbands are working abroad. Mothers, despite covering the family responsibilities single-handedly while their husbands strive to meet the financial needs of the family, may not always be allowed to take independent decisions on family matters. This results in delayed decision making in families from small to important matters, such as sending children for school picnics, participation in a coaching class (F. Malden, Personal communication, July 8,2022).

Moreover, most of the mothers belonging to the working class and are busy with their work schedules which may consists of target oriented deliverables and work related stress leaving them with little time for self-care and maintenance of the attachment and caregiving systems for their children and may contribute to the inconsistency in parenting attitude and behaviour.

The study shows that authoritative Parenting as associated negatively with behavioural problems such as in Emotional, conduct, hyperactivity and thus contributes to a low level of emotional and behavioural difficulties in children. Authoritarian parenting is associated positively with prosocial behaviour. Permissive and Uninvolved parenting style has been associated with conduct problems. Uninvolved parenting style is seen to be associated with behavioural problems such as conduct, hyperactivity and peer problem.

Children raised by mothers with uninvolved parenting style scored low on prosocial behaviour and high on difficulties. Children who perceived their mothers as authoritative showed high on prosocial behaviour.

In nuclear families, parents may provide greater freedom and set few boundaries and children are dependent solely on their parents for emotional support. In nuclear families as there are no elders or relatives to support childcare, when both the parents belong to the working class, parental stress may be higher due to their struggle in maintaining work-life balance. In such families, especially in the case of single parenting, the parent would be unable to provide children with time and space and hence may give full autonomy to children with few boundaries.

Urban living seems to increase a person's risk of developing psychological issues. Urban living may be associated with higher levels of social stress. Urbanisation affects mental health through the influence of increased stressors such as overcrowded environments and high levels of violence, and reduced social support (Srivastava, 2009).

The higher level of emotional symptom seen in men may be owing to the culture specific values and gender stereotype that exist 'men do not cry' and as a result of which men may suppress their emotions, hence experience greater internalising symptoms and may potentially precipitate as externalised out ward behaviours such as aggressiveness. It is



## **Emotional and Behavioural Problems in Left-Behind Children and Perceived Maternal Parenting Styles**

crucial to investigate how emotions are handled within the family environment in parent child interactions based on the gender difference of their children.

From this study, it is clear that Authoritative parenting style is found to be the most effective style of parenting. Children raised by authoritative parents tend to be more energetic, friendly and show development of general competencies for dealing with others and their environments (Baumrind, 1993; Simons et al., 2005).

### ***Summary***

The objective of the study was to examine the relationship between the perceived maternal parenting styles and emotional and behavioural problems in left behind children. The study shows that the children of parents with authoritarian parenting style show conduct problems, peer problems and emotional and behavioural difficulties and for the authoritarian parenting style, low prosocial behavior is noted. Authoritative parenting is associated negatively with emotional and behavioural problems such as emotional, conduct problems, hyperactivity and peer problems.

A positive correlation is evident between the prosocial scale and authoritative parenting; however, the correlation was statistically insignificant. Total score of the difficulties has been found to be low in children who perceived their mother as authoritative. Permissive and Uninvolved parenting style has been associated with conduct problems. Uninvolved parenting style is seen to be associated with behavioural problems such as conduct, hyperactivity and peer problems. Children raised by mothers with uninvolved parenting style showed low on prosocial behavior and high on difficulties.

### **CONCLUSION**

The process of parenting especially in the context of left behind children, being attuned well to a child's needs, being available emotionally are not always an easy task, but accompanied by stress and strain for the caregiver. It is interesting to note that most of the caregivers are working to meet the needs of life and are emotionally unavailable, and there may be a drain in care and the children may suffer from inconsistent parenting.

Migrant parents often try to ensure that all the physical needs are met, however many children fail to recognize the gifts or materials as love, instead recognize it as a reward for their sacrifice of staying away from their parents. It is imperative that we speak about creating 'Safe Space' at home, school and surrounding environment that provides emotional immunity and insulates children from toxic stress resulting from adverse childhood experiences.

Safe Space also means, the freedom for children to freely open up their feelings, concerns, doubts and the boldness to seek help. Adequate support from family members, relatives, school, administrative bodies, agencies and even the neighbourhood community could act as a shock absorber and a cushion to provide the psycho-social support as these children navigate through the uneven path. Bowlby said, it is vital that a caregiver, though not biological be present and attentive to child's emotional, psychological and physical needs. Being emotionally available is imperative to child mental health.

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## Emotional and Behavioural Problems in Left-Behind Children and Perceived Maternal Parenting Styles

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