

Research Paper

## The Heart of Care Beyond Shelter Walls: How Environmental Satisfaction Builds Resilient Life Skills in Vulnerable Youth

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Adolescents in residential care facilities face unique developmental challenges that may be profoundly influenced by their satisfaction with living conditions. Understanding the relationship between environmental satisfaction and life skills development is crucial for optimizing care practices and improving developmental outcomes. **Objective:** This study examined the relationship between satisfaction with living conditions and life skills development among adolescents residing in shelter homes, with particular focus on identifying life skills domains most susceptible to environmental influences. **Methods:** A cross-sectional study was conducted with 120 adolescents (aged 12-17 years) from four shelter homes in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India. Life skills were assessed using the Comprehensive Inventory for Life-Skills in Adolescents (CILSA). Environmental satisfaction was assessed through structured interviews. One-way ANOVA examined differences across satisfaction groups. **Results:** Significant differences were found across satisfaction groups in six life skills domains: self-awareness ( $F = 3.71, p = 0.03$ ), empathy ( $F = 2.99, p = 0.05$ ), creative thinking ( $F = 5.85, p < 0.001$ ), stress coping ( $F = 5.62, p < 0.001$ ), communication ( $F = 7.88, p < 0.001$ ), and interpersonal skills ( $F = 6.06, p < 0.001$ ). The total life skills composite score demonstrated a substantial 27-point difference between satisfied ( $108.18 \pm 21.57$ ) and unsatisfied ( $80.82 \pm 19.49$ ) adolescents ( $F = 4.89, p = 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.08$ ). **Conclusions:** Environmental satisfaction significantly predicts life skills development among adolescents in residential care, with communication and interpersonal skills showing the strongest associations. These findings provide empirical support for implementing trauma-informed, environment-focused approaches in institutional child care settings.

**Keywords:** *Adolescents, Residential care, Life skills, Environmental satisfaction, Institutional care, Child welfare*

Adolescents in residential care facilities represent one of the most vulnerable populations in global child welfare systems, often having experienced complex trauma, family disruption, or socioeconomic adversity (Gypen et al., 2017; Taussig et al., 2019). These young people face significant developmental challenges that extend beyond their initial circumstances, with research consistently documenting elevated risks for

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adverse outcomes including educational underachievement, mental health difficulties, and compromised social adjustment (Courtney et al., 2011).

Recent global research has highlighted concerning trends in adolescent well-being, with studies documenting that adolescence represents the developmental period during which life satisfaction declines most rapidly across world regions (Rudolf & Bethmann, 2023). This decline has been linked to various developmental and mental health outcomes, with life satisfaction serving as both a predictor and outcome of adaptive functioning (Gallardo et al., 2023). For adolescents in residential care, these normative challenges are compounded by additional stressors associated with institutional living.

Life skills development represents a fundamental aspect of healthy adolescent development, encompassing the cognitive, emotional, and social competencies necessary for successful transition to independent adulthood (Nasheeda et al., 2019). The World Health Organization (1999) framework identifies ten core life skills domains: self-awareness, empathy, critical thinking, creative thinking, decision making, problem solving, effective communication, interpersonal relationships, coping with stress, and managing emotions.

Theoretical frameworks from developmental psychology suggest that environmental factors may play a pivotal role in life skills acquisition. Attachment theory posits that secure relationships and stable environments provide the foundational security necessary for healthy emotional and social development (Bowlby, 1988). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory emphasizes that the quality of immediate living environments directly impacts developmental trajectories through multiple pathways (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Despite the theoretical importance of environmental factors, empirical research examining the relationship between living condition satisfaction and life skills development in residential care contexts remains sparse, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (Desai et al., 2018). India presents a particularly relevant context, with an estimated 30 million children in need of care and protection, many residing in various forms of institutional care arrangements (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2018).

This study addresses these gaps by examining the relationship between satisfaction with living conditions and life skills development among adolescents in shelter homes in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. The research aims to: (1) assess differences in life skills competencies across levels of environmental satisfaction, (2) identify which specific life skills domains are most susceptible to environmental influences, and (3) provide evidence-based recommendations for improving residential care practices.

### **METHODS**

#### ***Study Design and Participants***

This cross-sectional comparative study included 120 adolescents aged 12-17 years ( $M = 14.2$ ,  $SD = 1.6$ ) residing in four shelter homes (Bal Grih) in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India. The sample comprised 58% female ( $n = 70$ ) and 42% male ( $n = 50$ ) participants. Participants were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representativeness across gender, age, and facility characteristics.

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**Inclusion criteria:** (a) age 12-17 years, (b) continuous residence for at least six months, (c) absence of severe cognitive impairment, and (d) provision of informed assent and appropriate guardian consent.

### *Measures*

- **Life Skills Assessment:** The self-structured The Comprehensive Inventory for Life-Skills in Adolescents was used to assess competency across ten WHO framework domains. The CILSA has demonstrated excellent psychometric properties in Indian adolescent populations (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ), with each domain assessed on a 3-point Likert scale.
- **Environmental Satisfaction Assessment:** Satisfaction with living conditions was assessed using structured interviews. The primary question was: "Overall, how satisfied are you with your current living conditions in this shelter home?" Participants were categorized into three groups: satisfied, partially satisfied, or unsatisfied, based on their responses and follow-up questions examining specific environmental aspects.

### *Ethical Considerations and Procedure*

The study received comprehensive ethical approval from the Institutional Ethics Committee and District Probation Officer authorization. Written informed consent was obtained from legal guardians, and informed assent from all adolescent participants. Individual assessment sessions were conducted in private, comfortable spaces, lasting approximately 45-60 minutes each.

### *Statistical Analysis*

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 28.0 with  $\alpha$  level set at  $p < 0.05$ . One-way ANOVA examined differences in life skills domains across satisfaction groups. Post-hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD test were conducted for significant omnibus F-tests. Effect sizes were calculated using eta-squared ( $\eta^2$ ) and interpreted according to Cohen's guidelines.

## **RESULTS**

### *Sample Characteristics*

Of the 120 participants, 37 (30.8%) were classified as satisfied with living conditions, 50 (41.7%) as partially satisfied, and 33 (27.5%) as unsatisfied. The mean total life skills score was 95.8 (SD = 22.4, range = 52-147). No significant gender differences were observed in overall life skills scores ( $t = 1.34$ ,  $p = 0.18$ ) or environmental satisfaction levels ( $\chi^2 = 2.45$ ,  $p = 0.29$ ).

### *Environmental Satisfaction and Life Skills Development*

Table 1 presents the comparison of life skills domains across satisfaction levels. Significant differences were found in six of ten domains, with effect sizes ranging from small to medium-large.

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**Table 1: Comparison of Life Skills Domains Across Environmental Satisfaction Levels**

Life Skills Domain	Satisfied (n=37) M±SD	Partially Satisfied (n=50) M±SD	Unsatisfied (n=33) M±SD	F	p
Self-Awareness	10.41±2.35	9.80±2.25	7.45±2.51	3.71	0.03*
Empathy	10.44±2.25	9.50±1.90	7.18±1.78	2.99	0.05*
Critical Thinking	11.16±2.70	11.30±2.50	9.82±3.43	1.21	0.30
Creative Thinking	12.03±3.14	12.20±2.78	8.00±2.72	5.85	0.00**
Managing Emotions	10.95±3.10	10.40±2.68	10.09±4.16	0.46	0.63
Coping with Stress	12.15±2.99	12.00±3.23	8.91±3.33	5.62	0.00**
Communication	11.84±3.10	11.70±2.55	7.27±1.85	7.88	0.00**
Interpersonal Skills	8.86±2.70	8.80±1.99	6.00±1.85	6.06	0.00**
Problem Solving	9.38±2.17	9.20±1.32	8.09±2.30	1.83	0.16
Decision Making	10.95±2.13	10.00±1.70	8.00±2.00	2.41	0.09
<b>Total Life Skills</b>	<b>108.18±21.57</b>	<b>104.90±19.34</b>	<b>80.82±19.49</b>	<b>4.89</b>	<b>0.01</b>

\*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01

**Domain-Specific Findings**

Table 1 presents a comparative analysis examining the relationship between children's satisfaction with living conditions and their life skills development in shelter home settings. The findings reveal substantive variations in life skills competencies that correspond directly to children's perceived satisfaction with their residential environment.

The statistical analysis demonstrates compelling evidence for environmental determinants of life skills development, with six domains exhibiting statistically significant differences across satisfaction levels. Self-awareness competencies showed significant variation (F = 3.71, p = 0.03), with satisfied children achieving the highest scores (10.41±2.35), followed by partially satisfied (9.80±2.25), and unsatisfied children (7.45±2.51). This pattern suggests that environmental satisfaction serves as a foundational element for children's capacity to recognize their emotional states and personal strengths.

Empathy development demonstrated statistical significance (F = 2.99, p = 0.05), with satisfied children scoring 10.44±2.25 compared to unsatisfied children's 7.18±1.78. Creative thinking exhibited the most pronounced significance (F = 5.85, p < 0.001), with satisfied children achieving substantially higher scores (12.03±3.14) versus unsatisfied children (8.00±2.72). This four-point differential indicates that environmental satisfaction plays a crucial role in fostering innovative thinking and creative expression.

Stress coping mechanisms showed significant differences (F = 5.62, p < 0.001), with satisfied children scoring 12.15±2.99 versus unsatisfied children's 8.91±3.33. Communication skills exhibited pronounced significance (F = 7.88, p < 0.001), revealing satisfied children scoring 11.84±3.10 compared to unsatisfied children's 7.27±1.85. Interpersonal skills demonstrated the strongest significance (F = 6.06, p < 0.001), with satisfied children outperforming unsatisfied children by nearly three points (8.86±2.70 vs. 6.00±1.85).

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While several domains did not achieve statistical significance, the patterns warrant consideration. Critical thinking ( $F = 1.21, p = 0.30$ ) showed a consistent trend favoring satisfied children ( $11.16 \pm 2.7$ ) over unsatisfied children ( $9.82 \pm 3.43$ ). Managing emotions showed minimal variation across groups ( $F = 0.46, p = 0.63$ ), suggesting emotional regulation skills may be less susceptible to environmental influences. Problem-solving ( $F = 1.83, p = 0.16$ ) and decision-making skills ( $F = 2.41, p = 0.09$ ) both approached significance, with satisfied children consistently outperforming unsatisfied counterparts.

The total life skills composite score demonstrated significant differences ( $F = 4.89, p = 0.01$ ), with satisfied children achieving  $108.18 \pm 21.57$  compared to unsatisfied children's  $80.82 \pm 19.49$ . This 27-point differential represents substantial practical significance that could impact children's developmental trajectories and future outcomes. The findings suggest that investments in improving living conditions may yield broad-spectrum benefits across multiple developmental domains, supporting environment-focused approaches to institutional child care that recognize the fundamental role of physical and social environments in promoting healthy development.

### DISCUSSION

This study provides compelling empirical evidence for a significant relationship between environmental satisfaction and life skills development among adolescents in residential care settings. The findings demonstrate that adolescents satisfied with their living conditions show significantly superior life skills competencies across multiple domains, with particularly pronounced differences in communication, interpersonal skills, creative thinking, and stress coping.

#### *Theoretical Implications*

The observed patterns provide strong empirical support for both attachment theory and ecological systems theory predictions regarding environmental influences on development. Environmental satisfaction appears to reflect the quality of care relationships and security provided by the living environment (Bowlby, 1988). When adolescents feel satisfied with their living conditions, they may experience enhanced psychological safety and reduced chronic stress activation, creating optimal conditions for skill development.

The particularly strong effects observed for interpersonal skills and communication competencies align with attachment theory's emphasis on the relational foundation of development. The ecological systems framework provides additional insight through its emphasis on environmental interconnectedness, where environmental satisfaction influences development through cascading effects across multiple pathways (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

#### *Domain-Specific Patterns*

The differential impact of environmental satisfaction across life skills domains reveals important insights about developmental processes. Communication skills and interpersonal competencies showed the largest effect sizes, suggesting that relationally-oriented skills are particularly sensitive to environmental influences. This pattern aligns with research indicating that social and emotional skills are heavily influenced by environmental context and relationship quality (Durlak et al., 2011).

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The pronounced effects on creative thinking extend beyond traditional expectations about environmental influences. Environmental satisfaction may enhance creative thinking by reducing chronic stress, providing psychological safety to explore novel ideas, and encouraging risk-taking through supportive relationships (Russ, 2014).

The relative stability of emotion management skills across satisfaction groups aligns with clinical research indicating that emotional regulation difficulties often stem from early trauma experiences and may require specialized therapeutic interventions regardless of current environmental quality (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010).

### *Practical Implications*

These findings have profound implications for residential care policy and practice. The large effect sizes observed indicate that environmental modifications could produce clinically meaningful improvements in developmental outcomes and may be more cost-effective than individual interventions alone.

- **Environmental Assessment:** Regular assessment of adolescents' satisfaction with living conditions should be integrated into routine care planning and quality assurance processes. Simple, direct assessment approaches could provide valuable information for identifying environmental problems and tracking improvements.
- **Staff Training:** The strong effects on interpersonal and communication skills suggest that staff-adolescent relationship quality may be a crucial mediating factor. Comprehensive staff training programs focused on trauma-informed care and relationship-building skills could enhance environmental satisfaction and developmental outcomes.
- **Participatory Approaches:** The importance of adolescents' subjective perceptions suggests that participatory approaches involving youth in decision-making about their living environment could be particularly beneficial through regular feedback sessions and collaborative problem-solving processes.

### *Cultural Considerations*

This study's findings from the Indian context contribute important insights to international literature. The strong relationships observed between environmental satisfaction and life skills development suggest these associations may be universal, transcending cultural boundaries. The collectivistic cultural context of India may amplify the importance of environmental satisfaction, as interpersonal harmony and group cohesion are highly valued cultural constructs.

### *Limitations*

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design prevents definitive causal inferences about the relationship between environmental satisfaction and life skills development. The reliance on self-report measures introduces the possibility of common method bias. The study's focus on a single geographic region and specific residential facility type limits generalizability to other contexts.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to establish causal relationships, incorporate multiple informants and objective measures, and examine diverse cultural contexts and care settings. Mechanistic research is needed to understand pathways through which environmental satisfaction influences life skills development.

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### *Policy Implications*

The findings support arguments for increased investment in residential care infrastructure and staff training. The potential for environmental improvements to yield broad-spectrum developmental benefits suggests such investments could be highly cost-effective. Policy makers should consider environmental quality as a fundamental component of effective residential care.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study provides robust empirical evidence that environmental satisfaction significantly predicts life skills development among adolescents in residential care, with particularly strong associations for communication, interpersonal skills, creative thinking, and stress coping competencies. The substantial effect sizes observed across multiple domains indicate that environmental improvements could yield broad-spectrum developmental benefits, potentially making environmental enhancement more cost-effective than isolated individual interventions.

The findings support the implementation of trauma-informed, environment-focused approaches that recognize the fundamental role of environmental quality in promoting healthy adolescent development. For policy makers and practitioners, these findings emphasize that addressing environmental concerns and enhancing adolescents' satisfaction with living conditions may be prerequisite to effective life skills programming and positive developmental outcomes.

The integration of environmental assessment and improvement with traditional therapeutic and educational interventions represents a promising direction for enhancing residential care effectiveness. Future efforts should prioritize environmental quality as a foundational element of effective care, recognizing that satisfied adolescents are better positioned to develop the life skills necessary for successful transition to independent adulthood.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

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