Coping with parental migration: A qualitative study on the social adaptation of left-behind children in Henan, China

Daxia Lei[1,2+]
Paramjit Singh Jamir Singh[1]
Azlinda Azman[1]

[1]School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia.
[1]Email: paramjit@usm.my
[1]Email: azlindaa@usm.my
[2]Department of Law and Public Administration, Yibin University, China.
[1,2]Email: leidaxia011@outlook.com

(+ Corresponding author)

ABSTRACT

This study explores the key challenges faced by left-behind children and examines their coping strategies, with the aim of proposing methods to enhance their social adaptation. Employing qualitative in-depth interviews, the research gathers data from left-behind children in rural areas, identifying a spectrum of coping strategies related to parental migration and evaluating their effects on social adaptation. These strategies include acceptance, environmental adaptation, the use of social media platforms like short-video apps, seeking social support, engaging in recreational activities, emotional self-regulation, and maintaining a positive outlook. The study offers a fresh perspective and framework for the social adaptation service system and advocates for the development of a social work model tailored to rural left-behind children.

Contribution/ Originality: This study uses in-depth interviews with left-behind children in rural areas to uncover how they regulate cognition and behavior to adapt to adverse environments. It offers a comprehensive framework for enhancing social adaptation through targeted interventions, whereas many previous studies have predominantly relied on quantitative methods and singular approaches.

1. INTRODUCTION

The World Migration Report estimated that in 2020, there were 281 million international migrants globally, with China ranking second among source countries for international migration (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2022). In rural China, the widespread issue of children being left behind by parents who migrate to urban areas for work has become increasingly severe. According to the latest survey by the National Bureau of Statistics of mainland China, there were 12,896,600 left-behind children in compulsory education in 2020 (The National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). These children, who are typically under the age of 18, are often cared for by grandparents or other relatives, while their parents work long hours in factories, construction sites, or other urban areas far from home.

Studies have corroborated that children exhibiting lower levels of secure attachment often demonstrate deficiencies in trust and communication with their parents and are more prone to displaying problematic behaviors. Conversely, children who maintain a higher level of secure attachment with their parents are more inclined to exhibit prosocial behavior. Left-behind children's lack of parental care and love, as well as inappropriate guardianship by their grandparents, will affect their growth (Sun & Jiang, 2017). Guang et al. (2017) found that left-

behind children exhibited more depressive symptoms than non-left-behind children and those who were left behind by both parents were most depressed. Recent research indicates that left-behind children often struggle with academic integration (Wang et al., 2021) experience heightened feelings of loneliness (Ling, Fu, & Zhang, 2017) and receive less support from peers. These challenges have sparked concern and prompted scholars to explore strategies to support their social and academic adaptation. Furthermore, literature reviews suggest that these children frequently encounter various developmental issues.

In recent years, the Chinese government has enacted substantial measures to mitigate the issue of children left behind in rural regions. Initiatives such as poverty eradication and rural revitalization strategies seek to enhance local economic development and incentivize migrant workers to return and establish businesses in their home areas. Nevertheless, the prevalence of left-behind children continues to be considerable. This paper examines the coping mechanisms employed by these children in the context of parental migration and proposes comprehensive strategies aimed at improving their well-being and facilitating their social integration.
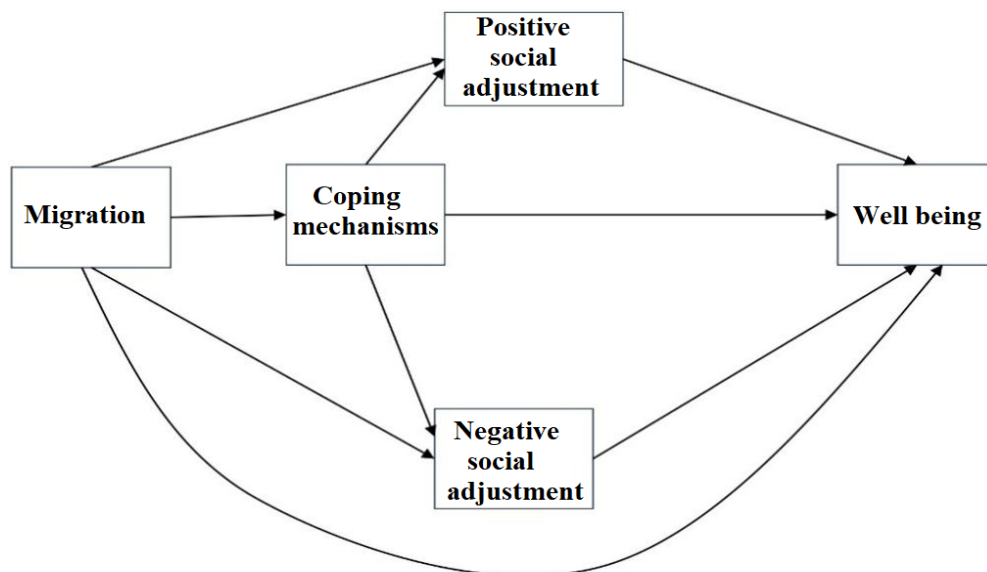

Figure 1. Social adaptation of left-behind children.

Figure 1 illustrates the social adaptation of left-behind children by depicting the relationships between migration, coping mechanisms, social adjustment, and well-being. Migration leads to the development of various coping mechanisms in children, which can result in either positive or negative social adjustments. Positive social adjustment contributes to the well-being of left-behind children, whereas negative social adjustment can also influence well-being but in adverse ways. The arrows indicate the direction and influence of each factor on the others, emphasizing the complex interplay between these elements in the context of left-behind children's lives.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Considerable research has illustrated the psychological effects of parental absence. A comprehensive meta-analysis revealed a correlation between parental migration and a heightened likelihood of mental health issues among Chinese children (Zhao & Yu, 2016). LBC were also shown to be prone to loneliness (Asis, 2006; Smeekens, Stroebe, & Abakoumkin, 2012). low life satisfaction and depression (Dreby, 2007) low self-esteem (Graham et al., 2012) and behavioral problems (Wickramage et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2016) in China and globally.

Research conducted in the Philippines highlighted that children experienced discomfort, communication difficulties, and mixed feelings about their relationships with their migrant fathers (Salazar, 2008). Additionally, Pribilsky (2001) proposed that the depression-like disorder known as 'nervous' observed in Ecuadorian children left behind could be attributed to disturbances in parent-child attachment. Parental absence due to migration may

contribute to higher rates of depression, anxiety, or loneliness among children, as observed in several studies. In a study employing the Adolescent Self-Rating Life Events Checklist (ASLEC), Guang et al. (2017) conducted a survey involving 6227 rural children aged 7-17 years. The findings revealed that left-behind children (LBC, N = 4181) experienced higher levels of stress and exhibited more depressive symptoms in response to stressful life events than their non-left-behind counterparts (NLBC, N = 2046). The research concluded that stress triggered by such life events poses a substantial risk factor for depressive symptoms among LBC. Correspondingly, Han, Zhao, Pan, and Liao (2018) observed that college students with a history of being left behind (LBE) scored higher on the ASLEC compared to those without such experiences, further highlighting the psychological impact of being a left-behind child.

Multiple studies suggest that left-behind children may experience issues with self-cognition, emotions, and learning (S. Wang & Zhang, 2020). Coping encompasses the cognitive and behavioral strategies employed by individuals to handle the pressures and demands presented by stressful situations, according to Folkman and Moskowitz (2004). It includes deliberate efforts to modify emotions, thoughts, actions, and physiological responses to stress (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001). Coping strategies encompass a range of mechanisms, including problem-focused, emotion-focused, support-seeking, and positive-thinking approaches. While all children have access to these coping mechanisms, individual children tend to develop a unique set of strategies that they customarily employ when faced with challenges. The selection of coping strategies theoretically influences the outcomes of life events, engendering distinct psychological and emotional experiences for each individual (Yu et al., 2020). Research has shown that Children exhibiting deficits in social problem-solving, or difficulties in identifying problems and generating appropriate solutions, are more prone to feelings of hopelessness, depression, and suicidal behaviors (Song et al., 2020). This correlation underscores the significance of fostering effective coping mechanisms in children, particularly among those in vulnerable groups like LBC. It is essential to note that the use of different coping strategies can affect the final results of life events and bring different psychological and emotional experiences to individuals (Yu et al., 2020). The study results show that LBC (left-behind children) use cognitive and behavioral adaptation strategies to enhance their overall level of social adaptation, such as participating in school activities and regulating emotions, life skills, and independence (Liu et al., 2023). Many previous studies have considered proactive coping to be a prerequisite for social adaptation. Understanding their parents' migration behavior can serve as a mental foundation for these children to adopt a positive approach in adapting to their left-behind life (Liu et al., 2023). Tao, Miller, and Gao (2018) provides a comprehensive synthesis of recent research on the stress and adjustment experiences of left-behind children due to parental work-related migration. This review examines various factors influencing their adjustment, including the nature of the migration, social and family dynamics, and the individual characteristics of the children. It underscores the critical role of school teachers, teacher educators, and related professionals in supporting the development of these children.

3. METHODS

3.1. Study Design

This study uses a qualitative research design, specifically in-depth interviews, to explore the coping strategies utilized by left-behind children to deal with the stressors of their situation in Zhoukou, Henan, China. Qualitative research is a suitable approach for investigating complex and subjective phenomena such as coping strategies, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The primary objective is to understand how these children perceive and interpret the stressors associated with their situation, paving the way for further research. Ultimately, the study aims to propose a social work service model that is tailored to the specific needs of left-behind children.

3.2. Informants

The study participants would encompass 20 left-behind children aged 6 to 18 years old through purposive sampling. The study sample was selected by fulfilling all the eligible left-behind children's criteria under "Selection of Participants". Interviews will be conducted with 20 children. The children were interviewed individually to reduce interference from other children. In this study, 20 left-behind children were asked questions based on the interview outline, and some open-ended questions were designed to encourage them to ask their questions and express their inner feelings.

3.3. Data Collection

In this study, the qualitative research method of in-depth interviews was utilized. In-depth interviews are a widely recognized method for data collection within qualitative research, allowing researchers to gather unobservable information such as feelings, thoughts, and perceptions. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, employing recording equipment and following a sequential approach. Prior to commencing interviews, consent was sought from the respondents for recording and transcribing. Each session lasted approximately 30 to 50 minutes, with the interviewer probing for an in-depth understanding of the interviewees' coping strategies (Kim, Lee, & Na, 2017).

3.4. Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a widely used approach to identify patterns and themes in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The researcher read the transcripts several times to gain familiarity with the data and identify initial codes. The initial codes were then grouped into themes, and the themes were refined through an iterative process of data coding and analysis. These themes were then systematically analyzed to determine the primary stressors faced by these children and the coping strategies they frequently used to manage their stress.

Table 1. Coping with parental migration.

Coping with parental migration	Frequency (N/20)	Percentage
Active adaptation to the environment	10	50%
Using social media platforms like short-video apps	16	80%
Seeking social support systems	15	75%
Engaging in recreation activities	13	65%
Practicing emotional self-regulation	10	50%
Positive thinking	9	45%

Table 1 illustrates various coping strategies employed by children dealing with parental migration. The table lists strategies such as active adaptation to the environment, use of social media platforms like short-video apps, seeking social support systems, engaging in recreational activities, practicing emotional self-regulation, and maintaining positive thinking. Each strategy is quantified by its frequency and corresponding percentage, calculated from a sample size of 20. For instance, using social media platforms is the most common strategy, utilized by 80% of the participants, while positive thinking is the least common, engaged in by 45%. The table effectively quantifies how these children adapt to the challenges posed by the absence of their parents.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Adapting Actively to the Environment

Left-behind children frequently display a level of maturity, precocity, and practical problem-solving that exceeds that of their peers. Many of these children also show a pronounced sense of independence and effective

communication skills. They have adeptly learned to manage tasks such as cooking, caring for livestock, completing homework independently, and attending school. Faced with daily challenges, these children demonstrate a remarkable capacity to devise and implement solutions without parental guidance. A left-behind child recounted,

As my grandmother grows older, I assist with farm work during busy periods and help with cooking at home. I am eager to grow up quickly so I can provide more support. Since my younger brother is still young, I frequently take care of him,

Furthermore, some children recognize their parents' efforts to work outside the home to enhance family welfare, as well as their grandparents' contributions. They actively transform adversity into motivation, proactively engaging in their school life, effectively handling difficulties, and devising coping strategies. Another left-behind child recounted,

Growing up without the constant presence of my parents was undeniably challenging and often saddening. I longed for their company but constantly reminded myself of the sacrifices they made for our well-being. Their tireless efforts outside were solely to ensure that my siblings and I received an education.

4.2. Using Social Media Platforms Like Short-Video Apps

Mobile networks have facilitated frequent exchanges and deep-level emotional communication between left-behind children and their parents, enabling them to maintain regular contact despite geographical separations. This technological advancement allows for interactions that closely mimic face-to-face communication, effectively bridging the gap between time and space. One left-behind child said,

I have been separated from my parents for a long time, but fortunately, I can chat and call them via WeChat video at any time. This is almost like seeing my parents every day.

Most left-behind children prefer engaging with various digital activities, such as video chatting, browsing TikTok, watching videos, playing games, listening to music, shopping on Taobao, and taking selfies. Additionally, these children frequently utilize mobile networks to maintain contact with their classmates and friends. Another left-behind child said,

When I am bored I watch short videos at home by myself, there are many interesting game commentaries, funny content, food sharing on short videos, and I can also learn a lot. I also often play online games with my friends to experience the feeling of competition in the game, which is also an experiential way to relax.

Five left-behind children utilize various learning software applications to facilitate their education. These include Application Ape for searching questions and homework assistance, Wealth Dictionary, and other apps synchronized with course content. One left-behind child stated that,

My teacher recommended an Application *for synchronous learning, and I downloaded the software that is synchronized with the course. Since then, whenever I do my homework, I can immediately check the answers, understand where I made mistakes, and then watch the relevant video analysis for immediate correction.*

4.3. Seeking Social Support Systems

Support from the extended family plays a pivotal role for left-behind children. Typically, this support is primarily provided by grandparents or, occasionally, the parents' cousins. While inadequate attachment to parents can adversely affect a child's development, the establishment of attachments with multiple surrogate caregivers, such as extended family members, can occur in the parent's absence. One left-behind child said,

I live with my grandparents and aunt. When I am unhappy, I tell my aunt, and she cheers me up.

Six respondents indicated that the neighbor's help, care, respect, and acceptance have helped them cope with various stressors. Another left-behind child said,

My grandparents, who cannot read or write, rely on our neighbors to help me fill out school paperwork and accompany me to and from school during bad weather. Our neighbors also offer us food and extend their assistance when we have heavier household tasks to handle. Their support has been invaluable and has made our lives easier.

During the interviews, several interviewees emphasized the importance of the close friendships they had formed while being left behind. These friendships provided them with support through both significant and minor difficulties, offered comfort during times of sadness, and even facilitated changes in their personalities. Through interaction with friends, left-behind children receive emotional support, advice, and solace. One left-behind child stated,

I cherish the time spent with my friends, often visiting their homes to chat, bike, and play sports. When struggling with homework, I seek help from classmates who assist in problem-solving. I also enjoy sharing experiences with them.

Teachers can offer targeted strategies to help alleviate their stress or provide emotional comfort to help them cope with their current challenges. The emotional support teachers provide helps left-behind children achieve emotional fulfillment. Another left-behind child stated that,

My teacher played a significant role in boosting my confidence and self-esteem. She showed me respect and encouragement, especially when she noticed my progress.

Some left-behind children have received child welfare assistance from local governments and schools, primarily addressing their material needs through reduced school fees and the provision of free lunches.

4.4. Engaging in Recreation Activities

During the interviews with left-behind children, the happiest times and best memories were when they were playing with their friends. Rural areas can provide natural recreational places for left-behind children, and the natural ecological environment of rural areas can provide some recreational objects for left-behind children. Hobbies and interests also help left-behind children discover their strengths and interests, which can keep them physically and mentally healthy and help them find the meaning of life.

In my free time, I participated in a variety of activities. We played games together, climbed mountains, jumped rope, played hide-and-seek, caught rocks, observed insects, and watched Television.

Community service facilities, while crucial for developing community activities, often remain underutilized due to a lack of professional management. The implementation of social work services has fostered better connections with children in these communities.

I participated in a community competition where I completed various stages, earned stars and stamps, and exchanged them for prizes. I was also part of a group organized by an institution where social worker sisters led games and taught us about safety and social communication skills in each session.

Engaging in Activities can enrich the lives of these "left-behind" children and help them discover the joys of life. Participating in their favorite activities not only maintains their physical and mental health but also enables them to discover meaning and purpose in life.

4.5. Practicing Emotional Self-Regulation

Left-behind children often employ different strategies to express their emotions, choosing methods that suit their individual personalities.

When many things are happening and everything seems chaotic, it can be frustrating not to have any answers. That's when writing down my thoughts becomes helpful. By jotting down each issue one by one, I can better understand my emotions and gain clarity on what's bothering me.

During the interviews, it became apparent that most left-behind children have accepted their situation and honed their skills in emotional self-regulation. Self-soothing, often paired with focus redirection, emerged as a vital technique. a left-behind child said,

From personal introspection, I've deduced that it's imperative not to wallow in self-pity or sadness.

Additionally, other interviewees reported using activities such as listening to music, running, and reading books as independent ways to express their emotions. Furthermore, other interviewees reported engaging in various activities to express their emotions independently.

4.6. Thinking Positively

Positive thinking is also one of the good qualities of left-behind children, as they can make a positive evaluation of their parents' long-term absence, face the difficulties in life positively, have an optimistic attitude towards their own situation, and have confidence and expectation for their future development. One left-behind child stated,

I do not hold my parents responsible for their decision to remain behind, as I am aware of the difficulties they face. Despite being left behind, my parents' higher income has improved my material well-being. Additionally, despite being separated physically, I have been able to feel their love and care through frequent phone calls and yearly visits.

For left-behind children, the decision of their parents to seek work outside is a significant life event. A nuanced understanding by the children, of the reasons for their parents' absence coupled with a positive emotional processing, lays the foundational psychological groundwork for their healthy adaptation to the left-behind lifestyle. Another left-behind child stated that,

Although my parents couldn't offer much companionship, they improved our financial situation. My grandparents, teachers, and classmates have always been supportive and caring, making me feel happy and fortunate. Despite growing up and studying in a challenging environment, I focus on the positives, embrace self-reliance, and constantly strive for self-improvement, particularly in my studies, to gain recognition from others.
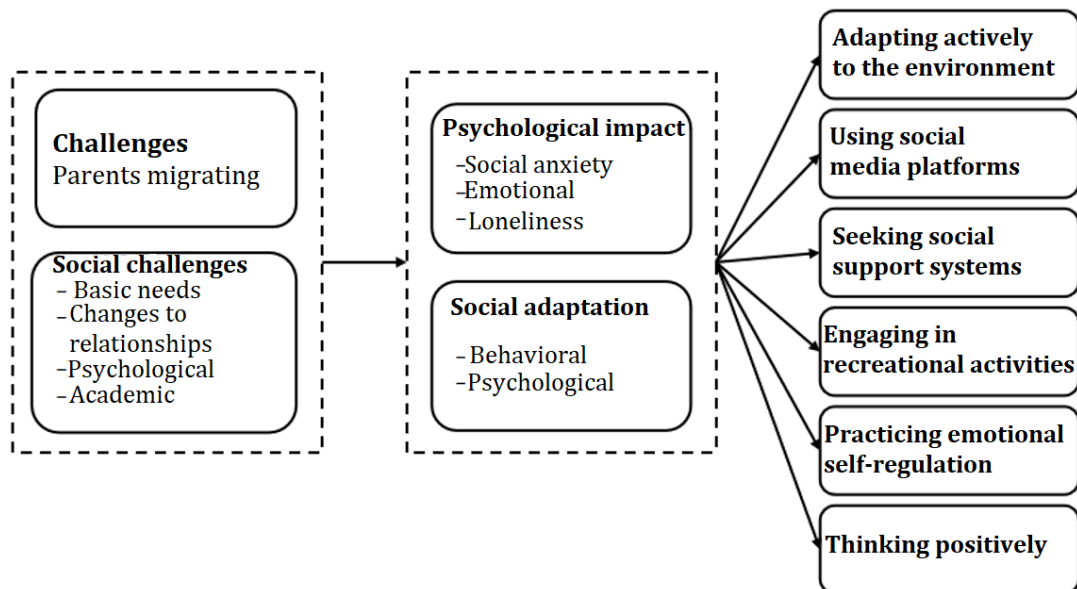

Figure 2. Coping with parents migrating.

Figure 2 illustrates the coping mechanisms adopted by children in response to the challenges posed by parental migration. The figure is structured into three main sections. The first section outlines the challenges, including parents migrating and the resultant social challenges such as basic needs, changes to relationships, psychological impacts, and academic issues. The second section details the psychological impact of these challenges, highlighting social anxiety, emotional disturbances, and loneliness. The third and final section maps out the methods of social

adaptation these children employ, including actively adapting to the environment, using social media platforms, seeking social support systems, engaging in recreational activities, practicing emotional self-regulation, and maintaining a positive mindset. These coping strategies help mitigate the psychological impacts and assist in social adaptation.

5. DISCUSSION

Coping encompasses the cognitive and behavioral strategies individuals use to manage stress from both internal and external sources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping styles significantly influence anxiety and depression levels in adolescents. Interview results from this study reveal that left-behind children utilize a variety of coping mechanisms to mitigate stress resulting from parental separation. Active coping methods have notably enhanced their psychological well-being and facilitated their adaptation to their social environments. This research demonstrates a robust correlation between coping styles and overall well-being, suggesting that an increase in well-being depends on the adoption of positive coping styles, such as proactive problem-solving and seeking help. Transitioning from negative to positive coping strategies effectively reduces interpersonal distress and life stress among left-behind children. For instance, problem-focused coping strategies, which involve altering or managing the relationship between the individual and the environment, can diminish stress by removing stressors, such as through the development of a detailed action plan for studying (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

Studies have highlighted the importance of children's personal coping resources specifically the enhancement of abilities like self-efficacy, creativity, and self-regulation, which can empower children to thrive under stress (Yendork & Somhlaba, 2015). Pearson, Kennedy, Talreja, Bhat, and Newman-Taylor (2021) characterized life skills as vital abilities necessary for an individual to sustain and enhance their life, positioning them as key instruments for effective social interaction. The coping behaviors exhibited by left-behind children serve as the wellspring of self-reliance that enables them to persevere amidst challenges. Their proactive efforts to enhance their current situation mirror this coping behavior. While left-behind children cannot escape their unique circumstances, they must confront and adapt to them head-on. By transforming their inner motivation into tangible actions, they strive to ameliorate their present conditions. Such endeavors necessitate that these children embark on a journey of self-transformation, actively seek life skills, exert dedication in both their personal lives and academic pursuits, and ultimately gain acknowledgment from their parents and the broader community.

This study also confirms that seeking social support alleviates psychological and emotional stress for left-behind children and assists them in navigating their challenging life circumstances, aligning with previous research findings. Social support plays a critical role in child development and is fundamentally associated with the mental health of left-behind children (Su, Li, Lin, & Zhu, 2017). It fosters a sense of love, care, and inclusion within a supportive social network, enhancing individual well-being and influencing developmental outcomes (Piko & Hamvai, 2010). Past study further highlights that parental and caregiver warmth and care significantly improve the psychological well-being of these children (Brabeck, Sibley, & Lykes, 2016). Positive peer interactions fulfill interpersonal needs and reduce stress, enhancing mental health (Zhao, Liu, & Wang, 2015). Teachers, as pivotal support figures, provide customized advice and skills to address students' psychological issues and promote mental well-being (Sisask et al., 2014). The Chinese government has launched educational initiatives to support left-behind children, such as the Plan for the Development of Education for Left-behind Children, which allocates funds to improve educational quality and conditions in rural schools. However, a policy gap exists as local rural governments lag in implementing specific mental health measures for these children. Additionally, it was discovered that children in communities with higher social capital levels exhibit improved psychological well-being. Community-based approaches emphasize the importance of neighborhood and community connections in promoting

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the psychosocial development of these children (Cheers, Darracott, & Lonne, 2007; Haski-Leventhal, Ben-Arieh, & Melton, 2008). This research suggests that community social capital plays a crucial role in safeguarding and fostering the psychosocial growth of left-behind children.

Given the widespread use of mobile phones in China and their numerous capabilities, such as the ability to maintain contact at any time from any location (Green & Haddon, 2009) the integration of the Internet into mobile communication, ubiquitous connectivity (Franchina, Vanden Abeele, Van Rooij, Lo Coco, & De Marez, 2018) and the role of mobile phones as a leading platform in digital media convergence (Goggin & Hjorth, 2014) enhanced by various downloadable applications beyond the device's native ones (De Reuver, Nikou, & Bouwman, 2016) examining the impact of social media on addressing the issues of parental separation and improving the conditions of left-behind children becomes important. Mobile phone communications enable left-behind children to maintain contact with distant family members, reducing feelings of isolation and abandonment through video calls. Additionally, the wide array of educational videos available on these platforms provides valuable learning opportunities that surpass traditional school curricula. Furthermore, short videos offer entertainment and relaxation, helping left-behind children manage stress and improve their leisure time enjoyment.

Emotion-focused coping is centered on managing distressing emotions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Emotion-focused coping strategies are mainly designed to reduce stress-induced distress. Interview results show that children left behind usually use different strategies to express their emotions, such as writing days, self-soothing, running, and listening to music. These emotion-centered approaches are essential to help them cope with the challenges they face and maintain their mental health.

Faced with the reality of being left behind and the inevitable experience of parental separation, left-behind children who adopt a positive interpretative framework typically exhibit good adaptive behaviors, consistent with findings from previous studies. Individuals mitigate the impact of stressful events by adjusting their perceptions, interpreting these events positively, discerning beneficial meanings within them, and ascribing positive connotations to ordinary occurrences. The significant presence of positive cognitive restructuring suggests that left-behind children (LBC) possess the capability to perceive their circumstances more optimistically, demonstrating a high degree of acceptance towards reality and life in general. LBC approaches problems with optimism, often downplaying the issue or its potential repercussions. Research by Navarez and Diaz (2017) yielded comparable findings, indicating that among a group of Philippine students left behind by parents working overseas, positive reframing served as a key coping mechanism, enabling them to view their challenges in a more favorable light and imbue their situations with greater meaning.

6. SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Social workers leverage research to advance the social work profession and improve societal conditions (Krysk & Finn, 2007). A global expectation is that the recent expansion of non-governmental organizations in China will enhance their role in delivering mental health services (Thara & Patel, 2010). By the end of 2018, China had over 800,000 governmental organizations employing more than 9.8 million people (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2020).

Social workers can help these children develop effective coping strategies such as seeking social support, engaging in social activities., adopting online communication, and building new social relationships. Maintaining ethical principles, including client autonomy, is crucial to protect the rights and interests of these children during service provision. Individual counseling and educational groups can significantly alleviate their stress and promote comprehensive development.

This research advocates for involving left-behind children in social support groups. Increased social support from family, friends, teachers, and peers can facilitate significant post-stress development. Factors like parental

support, teacher encouragement, and social worker services are critical. Social workers should enhance these children's access to support resources, expand their support networks, and improve their capacity to utilize such support, fostering a positive attitude in facing challenges. Policy makers should concentrate on equipping left-behind children with more abundant social resources and broadly improving their welfare.

Addressing the challenges of left-behind children necessitates a robust external support system, integrating family, school, community, and societal support to effectively address their needs. Most children remain silent, give up, or retreat when faced with major events due to helplessness. However, a comprehensive support system can empower them to overcome difficulties with confidence and actively resolve hardships. Linking family, school, community, and societal support into a cohesive system can maximize children's potential and provide a fair social environment. Bronfenbrenner's social/ecological systems theory Bronfenbrenner (1979) informs the proposed intervention framework, emphasizing that individual outcomes result from interactions within specific environments and societal pressures (Itzhaky & York, 2001). Interventions should target both the ontogenetic level, encompassing the child and their immediate contexts—peers, family, school—and the broader societal context, including the extended community or neighborhood.

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