

Family education dilemmas of left-behind children in ethnic minority areas and social work intervention strategies—based on related survey findings in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China

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Abstract. This study investigates the current situation of family education for rural left-behind children in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of China through questionnaires and interviews. The results indicate that some left-behind children are addicted to electronic devices, while their guardians fail to provide effective supervision; most left-behind children face academic difficulties and do not receive timely or effective tutoring; many guardians feel significant pressure in educating their children and have a low self-evaluation of fulfilling parenting responsibilities; and community-based family education guidance services are insufficient, with relatively few such services being provided. The current demand for family education guidance services for rural left-behind children mainly includes improving children's self-management and learning abilities, helping guardians acquire and enhance family education skills, and linking community resources to deliver family education guidance. Therefore, the professional advantages of social work should be utilized, and methods such as case social work, group social work, community social work, social work administration, social work supervision, and social work research can be selected based on the actual situation for single or integrated interventions, so as to effectively solve the family education dilemmas of rural left-behind children.

Keywords: left-behind children, family education, social work intervention

1. Introduction

Family education is a vital component of modern national education and serves as the foundation for both school education and social education. The quality and effectiveness of family education directly affect children's lifelong development, the well-being of countless families, and the future of the nation and its people. Therefore, family education guidance must balance the needs of parents, children's development, social requirements, and national priorities [1]. Rural left-behind children, like all children, represent the future and hope of the country. In 2016, there were 9.02 million rural left-behind children in China; by the end of 2021, this number had decreased to 4.77 million [2]. The Chinese government attaches great importance to the care, protection, and family education of rural left-behind children. Over the past decade, multiple laws and policy documents have been issued, explicitly encouraging the participation of social workers.

In 2016, the Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening Care and Protection of Rural Left-Behind Children proposed accelerating the development of professional social work service agencies. Relevant departments such as civil affairs were tasked with supporting these agencies to engage deeply with urban and rural communities, schools, and families through government service procurement, providing professional services including guardianship guidance, psychological counseling, behavioral correction, social integration, and family relationship adjustment for rural left-behind children. In 2017, the Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China and others issued the Guiding Opinions on Playing the Role of Social Work Professionals in Caring and Protecting for Rural Left-behind Children, which clarified that one of the main tasks of social work professionals is to assist in providing family education guidance. The China Children Development Outline (2021–2030) further stipulated support for social work agencies, volunteer organizations, and professional practitioners to carry out family education

guidance services in accordance with laws and regulations. The Family Education Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China (implemented in 2022) also explicitly encourages social workers and volunteers to participate in family education guidance services. The 2024 revision of the Law on the Protection of Minors of the People's Republic of China requires local governments to cultivate, guide, and regulate relevant social organizations and social workers to participate in the protection of minors and carry out family education guidance services.

In summary, social work intervention in family education guidance for rural left-behind children in China is supported by relevant policies, legal frameworks, and practical significance. According to the 2023 Guangxi Civil Affairs Statistical Yearbook, there are 208,662 rural left-behind children in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in China [3]. Based on a survey of family education among rural left-behind children in Guangxi, this study analyzes the difficulties faced in family education and the demand for guidance services, and proposes strategies for optimizing social work interventions in family education guidance services.

2. Survey design on family education and guidance services for rural left-behind children

2.1. Survey participants

The participants of this survey primarily included registered left-behind children and their guardians within the civil affairs and education systems of N City, L City, and C City in Guangxi, as well as community staff and social workers (providers of family education guidance services) in various cities of Guangxi. The vast majority of left-behind children who participated in the student-version questionnaires had their guardians complete the corresponding parent-version questionnaires.

2.2. Survey methods and data

The research team conducted the survey through a combination of in-home observation, questionnaire surveys and interviews. A total of 531 valid questionnaires from left-behind children were collected, of which 23% were from primary school students, 69% from junior high school students, and 8% from senior high/vocational school students. A total of 487 valid questionnaires from guardians were returned, with fathers accounting for 38%, mothers 45%, grandparents or other intergenerational caregivers 12%, and other relatives or friends 5%. The community staff surveyed were mainly women's federation chairpersons and child directors, with data collected primarily through interview records. The social workers surveyed included heads of social work service agencies, project managers, social work supervisors, and frontline social workers, with data collected through questionnaires and interview records. A total of 113 valid questionnaires from social workers were collected.

3. Analysis of family education dilemmas faced by rural left-behind children

3.1. Some left-behind children are addicted to electronic devices, and their guardians fail to provide effective supervision

According to the questionnaire statistics, 41% of left-behind children reported experiencing negative emotions such as helplessness, feelings of worthlessness, loneliness or abandonment. Forty-six percent of guardians indicated that their children were addicted to electronic devices (spending an average of more than two hours per day on entertainment and games), yet only 35% of children reported being frequently supervised while using electronic devices. This indicates that nearly half of the left-behind children have issues with electronic device addiction, and most guardians fail to consistently supervise or effectively limit their usage.

Field visits and interviews revealed that left-behind children often experience loneliness due to a lack of companionship and supervision, and with limited community activities to participate in, they resort to watching television or playing video games to pass the time. Many caregivers, busy with farm work and household chores from early morning to late evening, lack the time to accompany or discipline children. Additionally, parents who live apart from their left-behind children face challenges in addressing issues related to electronic device addiction and negative emotions due to long-distance separation, infrequent interaction and extended working hours, making timely assistance difficult.

3.2. Most left-behind children face learning difficulties and do not receive timely or effective tutoring

Seventy-two percent of left-behind children reported encountering various learning difficulties, including difficulty concentrating in class, struggling to understand lessons, feeling pressured by schoolwork, lacking timely help with assignments, disinterest in learning, and difficulty completing homework on time. However, only 30% of guardians provided guidance on study methods

and skills, and just 17% assisted with homework. Only 31% of children reported that their cohabiting caregivers could help them address academic problems.

Field observations and multiple interviews indicated that most left-behind children performed well academically and behaviorally in lower grades (often receiving numerous school awards), but their performance and grades declined in higher grades. The reasons include: (1) caregivers' relatively low educational levels, combined with the increased complexity and difficulty of current primary and secondary school curricula, limiting their ability to provide academic guidance; (2) caregivers' preoccupation with earning a livelihood, leaving insufficient time and energy to support children's studies and homework; (3) many caregivers lacking a strong sense of primary responsibility for education, believing their main role is to provide for children's basic needs while academic learning should be handled primarily by teachers.

3.3. Most guardians feel high pressure in educating children, and satisfaction with their parenting role is low

Ninety-five percent of guardians reported engaging in various aspects of family education and guidance, including teaching self-protection awareness and skills (66%), life skills (61%), behavior and habit cultivation (56%), moral education and compliance with laws (50%), interpersonal skills (39%), mental health education (37%), emotional management (34%), patriotism and civic awareness (31%), study methods and skills (30%), and homework assistance (17%).

However, only 46% of guardians felt they could effectively resolve more than half of the problems and challenges encountered in their children's growth and education. Sixty-seven percent reported feeling significant pressure in educating their children. When self-assessing their fulfillment of parenting responsibilities, only 36% expressed satisfaction, 60% rated it as "average" and 4% were "dissatisfied". This indicates that roughly two-thirds of guardians feel substantial pressure in educating their children and are not highly satisfied with their own performance in fulfilling their parenting duties.

3.4. Insufficient community-based family education guidance, with limited services provided

According to the Guiding Opinions of the All-China Women's Federation, Ministry of Education, and Central Civilization Office on Further Strengthening Parent School Work, parent schools are the main platform and channel for guiding and promoting family education, typically categorized into three types: schools, streets or communities (villages), and government or enterprise-affiliated parent schools. One of their main tasks is "to provide guidance and services to parents and children in various forms to help solve difficult issues in family education". Furthermore, according to the Opinions on Further Improving the Care Service System for Rural Left-Behind Children and Vulnerable Children issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China and others, "strengthening the primary responsibility of guardians and family education" is one of the key business training contents for the construction of grassroots children's work teams.

The survey found that rural community-level staff in China are few and have multiple responsibilities, and the village's public funds are limited, leaving little personnel or budget for family education guidance services. Many rural communities have not established parent schools, or if established, lack full-time or part-time personnel to consistently carry out related work. Grassroots child workers primarily conduct periodic telephone contact or home visits with left-behind children. Some communities organize activities in collaboration with nearby schools, but these mainly focus on safety education, with few other types of family education guidance services. Consequently, residents—including rural left-behind children—generally have limited access to family education guidance and support through community channels.

4. Analysis of the demand for family education guidance services for rural left-behind children

4.1. Guiding children to use electronic devices reasonably and enhancing self-management and learning abilities

Research indicates that deficiencies in family atmosphere, education and interaction serve as internal drivers that push left-behind children toward the digital world as a means of emotional compensation. Online games and internet subcultures also allow children to gain a sense of recognition, achievement and group belonging within specific virtual contexts [4]. Moreover, using the internet at home can help children complete homework and improve academic performance [5], and moderate internet use for information searching and knowledge acquisition has a significant positive impact on the development of self-management abilities in younger left-behind children [6]. However, excessive internet use can lead to vision deterioration and negatively affect cervical and lumbar spine development [7].

According to questionnaire results, 88% of parents and left-behind children maintain contact at least once a week on average, primarily through video calls, voice calls, or text-based communication (e.g., SMS, WeChat messages or letters). This shows that left-behind children rely on electronic devices to maintain communication and interaction with their parents in daily life. Therefore, it is necessary to cultivate children's interest and ability in using electronic devices for learning, guiding them to control the purpose and duration of their device use. This approach can help them develop good learning habits and healthy

internet use, satisfy the need for daily parent-child communication, and simultaneously enhance self-management and learning abilities, addressing both electronic device addiction and academic challenges.

4.2. Guardians need to enhance family education skills to improve parenting effectiveness and satisfaction

Questionnaire results show that 71% of guardians require guidance and support in family education. Preferred forms of guidance include one-on-one or individual instruction (49%), small group or group guidance (43%), parent-child activities (40%), thematic training lectures (39%), and discussion-based tea sessions (9%). The areas guardians hope to learn or improve include, in order of priority: guidance on parenting methods (57%), moral and legal awareness (50%), life skills development (46%), parent-child communication skills (45%), safety knowledge and self-protection skills (44%), cultivation of patriotism and civic awareness (38%), development of behavioral habits (37%), scientific parenting concepts (37%), mental health education (35%), adjustment of parent-child relationships (35%), learning exploration skills/methods (31%), emotional management techniques (30%), and family environment building (22%). Additionally, many parents expressed a desire to effectively guide children to avoid excessive phone and game use and hoped children could assist with simple household or farm chores.

Based on these needs and expectations, social workers can provide family education guidance services to guardians of left-behind children, helping them shift from a "focus on care over education" mindset, establish a sense of primary responsibility for family education, enhance parenting methods and skills, and ultimately improve their self-efficacy and satisfaction in fulfilling parenting responsibilities.

4.3. Communities should clarify family education guidance responsibilities, operate parent schools and leverage their role

Studies have pointed out that relying solely on school-level initiatives in family education guidance is insufficient to meet the diversified needs of families [8]. Urban and rural communities in China, however, possess unique advantages in resources, geography and organization [9], which schools and other institutions cannot match. Communities can complement other channels of family education guidance and serve as a key platform for family-school-society collaboration in child development. Therefore, developing and improving community-based family education guidance services is crucial for enhancing the quality of family education and promoting children's healthy growth.

The Notice on Issuing the Work Plan for the Family-School-Society Collaborative Education "Teaching Alliance" issued by the Ministry of Education and sixteen other departments of the People's Republic of China emphasizes that in such alliances, street and community responsibilities include "integrating family education guidance into urban and rural community public services, strengthening resources, funding, venues and facilities", and "using community parent schools to provide family education guidance" [10]. Accordingly, given the previously identified shortage of family education guidance personnel and the limited services currently provided, communities should clearly define and prioritize their family education guidance responsibilities. They should establish and operate community parent schools, strengthen resources, funding, venues, and facilities, and strive to link with civil affairs departments, women's federations and schools to implement family education guidance services, thereby meeting the family education guidance needs of left-behind children and other community residents.

5. Optimization strategies for family education guidance services for rural left-behind children

Social work is a professionalized helping activity guided by altruistic values, grounded in scientific knowledge, and implemented through evidence-based methods. The advantages of social work intervention in family education guidance include operational feasibility, diversity of intervention forms and clarity of intervention objectives [11]. Therefore, optimizing family education guidance services for rural left-behind children can be achieved through social work interventions. The targets of intervention include not only the left-behind children and their guardians, but also teachers in the children's schools, community staff, family education volunteers, and relevant responsible entities such as government departments, civil affairs offices, educational administrative departments and women's federations. Intervention methods may involve direct services such as case work, group work, and community work, or indirect services such as social work administration, social work research, and social work supervision. These methods can be applied independently or integrated according to the needs of the service recipients.

5.1. Using case work to provide targeted family education guidance to individuals or families

Social workers can use case work methods to provide family education guidance to left-behind children and families who are addicted to electronic devices or facing academic difficulties. In the service process, social workers not only intervene directly with the children but also provide indirect support to their guardians, teachers and other relevant parties. For example, they can guide children in analyzing how electronic device addiction disrupts their daily life and learning, teach guardians to use positive

parenting methods for effective communication and accompaniment, and promote collaboration among family, school and community. This helps enhance children's self-management, learning abilities and labor skills, strengthens guardians' capacity for family education, fosters good internet and study habits, and encourages children to take on age-appropriate household tasks. This approach reduces time spent on electronic devices while alleviating guardians' parenting pressures.

Case 1: Social workers at the Y Social Work Service Center in N City, Guangxi, applied case work methods to provide family education guidance to a left-behind child, Xiao Su, and his family over three months. Xiao Su's father transformed his previously harsh communication style into a gentle and positive approach, improving remote interaction and emotional bonding with Xiao Su. Xiao Su gradually abandoned his former bad habits—excessive gaming, irregular sleep and poor diet—becoming proactive in household chores, reducing daily phone use from six hours to one hour, and developing interests in reading and community volunteer work.

5.2. Using group work to provide collective guidance for groups with shared needs or similar issues

To address the issue of “left-behind children addicted to electronic devices with insufficient guardian supervision”, social workers can form parent-child groups with affected children and guardians. These groups can analyze the benefits of reasonable device use and the consequences of addiction, explore strategies for developing good internet habits and self-management skills, and teach parents and children how to use electronic devices to support learning. Children can also be guided to participate in age-appropriate household tasks and volunteer work, while guardians are encouraged to adopt positive changes in accompaniment, care, education and supervision.

For the challenge of “left-behind children facing academic difficulties without timely or effective tutoring”, social workers can use group work to provide guidance. Children can share their learning challenges, then, from a strengths-based and resilience perspective, analyze their own advantages, potential and available external resources, helping them build social support networks. After the group work, children can independently apply these strategies to solve future academic challenges.

To address “guardians feeling high pressure in educating children and low satisfaction with parenting”, social workers can form education groups for guardians with similar difficulties. These groups provide opportunities for guardians to share experiences, receive targeted training and guidance, enrich knowledge and skills in family education, and develop mutual support networks to assist each other with future parenting challenges.

Case 2: The Q Social Work Service Center in N City, Guangxi, implemented the “Three Left-Behind” (left-behind children, left-behind women and left-behind elderly) social work service project. Social workers provided various family education guidance services in the form of group work, including children's councils to enhance community participation, children's volunteer training groups, parent-child communication education groups, parent-child relationship enhancement groups, and parenting support groups. Through these groups, left-behind children improved community participation and volunteer skills, while left-behind women and elderly caregivers learned practical parenting methods, fostering better parent-child relationships and establishing mutual support networks among families in the community.

5.3. Using community social work strategies to expand service coverage through community education and development resources

To address “insufficient community family education guidance personnel and limited services” and meet the need for “guardians enhance family education skills to improve parenting effectiveness and satisfaction”, social workers can employ community work methods, using strategies from regional development models such as community education, community participation, service provision and resource development. For instance, social workers can carry out community education activities related to family education such as promoting parent-child communication and parent-child relationship, help the community discover and train family education volunteers, and bring in experienced experts to guide family education services. These efforts foster collective attention to community-wide family education challenges and establish a community mutual support system.

Social workers can also follow the “community-based care” model to provide family education guidance for left-behind children and their families. This includes mobilizing and training the “Five Elders” (veteran cadres, veteran soldiers, veteran experts, veteran teachers and veteran models) in the community or professionals with expertise in psychology, law, social work, education or healthcare to serve as family education volunteers, acting as “caring parents” or “caring mothers” for left-behind children to provide them with services such as emotional support, mental health guidance and academic tutoring, and provide their guardians with services such as family education guidance and family guardianship support. Community venues such as children's centers or parent schools can offer academic tutoring, while “mobile social work stations” can provide ongoing services such as art, board games and reading, helping alleviate academic challenges and electronic device addiction among left-behind children.

Case 3: The H Social Work Service Center in G City, Guangxi, implemented community (village) parent school family education guidance services. By linking resources such as lawyers and family education experts, they delivered services via

“mobile social work stations” to various villages. Services for residents, including left-behind children, included workshops such as Legal Safeguards in Family Education—Guidelines for Parents on Preventing Sexual Abuse and Juvenile Delinquency, How to Enhance Children’s Sense of Security Through Parent-Child Communication, Improving Focus and Concentration in Children, Parent-Child Education Through Nature, and Parent-Child Reading Strategies. These programs helped parents adopt more scientific parenting concepts and acquire practical family education skills.

5.4. Translating policies into concrete services through social work administration and providing recommendations for improving policies

Social work administration is the dynamic process of transforming macro-level social policies into concrete social services while continuously summarizing experience and refining social welfare policies based on practical needs [12]. To address the challenge of “insufficient community personnel for family education guidance and limited service provision”, social workers can apply social work administrative methods to promote the implementation of relevant legal provisions of the Family Education Promotion Law of the People’s Republic of China and policy documents such as the Work Plan for School-Family-Society Collaborative Education ‘Teaching Alliance’ issued by the Ministry of Education and sixteen other departments of the People’s Republic of China. By leveraging resource-linking advantages, social workers can ensure that community parent schools have adequate resources, funding, venues and facilities. Governmental bodies, civil affairs offices or women’s federations can purchase community family education guidance services from social work service agencies or other social organizations, cultivating teams of family education instructors and volunteers, and providing inclusive family education guidance services for community residents, including left-behind children.

In addition, social workers can refer to the Typical Cases of Strengthening Social Work Services in Juvenile Prosecution Work issued by the Supreme People’s Procuratorate and the Central Social Work Department in China (2025) to provide recommendations for government, education, civil affairs, women’s federations, and the Working Committee for the Care of the Next Generation. Then they can jointly study and develop publications such as Typical Cases of Strengthening Social Work Services in Left-Behind Children’s Families or Typical Cases of Social Work Participation in Family Education Guidance for Left-Behind Children, providing experiential references for social work interventions in family education guidance across different regions.

5.5. Providing social work supervision for frontline social workers and volunteers with limited experience or encountering challenges

To mitigate the dilemma of “insufficient community personnel for family education guidance and limited services”, it is essential for social workers to provide supervision to frontline social workers and family education volunteers who lack experience or face difficulties in providing services to left-behind children and their families. This supervision helps strengthen service philosophy, enhance service capacity, and address challenges, thereby expanding the scope and effectiveness of family education guidance services.

Specifically, supervision of frontline social workers primarily includes educational and supportive supervision. Educational supervision involves helping social workers continuously acquire and improve knowledge and skills in family education guidance, encouraging practical application, and promoting self-reflection to enhance service capacity and effectiveness. Supportive supervision assists social workers in managing the frustrations, disappointments and emotional challenges of service work, providing timely care and support, recognizing achievements, boosting self-efficacy, and fostering a sense of professional identity and value, which encourages sustained engagement in family education guidance services.

Supervision of family education volunteers involves administrative, educational and supportive supervision. First, it helps volunteers understand and adhere to work procedures and discipline, establishing appropriate service values and work attitudes. Second, it assists in arranging tasks according to volunteers’ willingness, availability, skills and experience, supplementing their technical capacity for family education guidance. Third, it provides timely recognition of outstanding performance and constructive feedback for areas needing improvement, thereby enhancing service efficiency, sustaining volunteer engagement, and improving the quality of family education volunteer services.

5.6. Applying social work research methods to assess service needs and effectiveness, and summarize best practices

Social work research methods include questionnaires, experimental research, observation, interviews, case study method, non-contact research, action research, and program evaluation [13]. In delivering family education guidance services to left-behind children and their families, social workers can use questionnaires, observation and interviews to evaluate service recipients’ needs and the effectiveness of services. They can also employ case study method, non-contact research and action research to summarize and improve social work practices in family education guidance. Findings can be disseminated in various forms, such

as typical cases, research reports, academic papers, media coverage, presentations at academic forums, or journal publications, providing decision-making references for government and educational authorities, thereby expanding the impact and effectiveness of social work participation in family education guidance.

Additionally, social workers can refer to practices outlined in the Supreme People's Procuratorate's Typical Cases of Comprehensive Family Education Guidance in Handling Juvenile-Related Cases (Fourth Batch), particularly the case of "Pan—Strengthening the Case Database and Promoting Systematic Family Education Guidance for Similar Cases". This approach emphasizes enhancing communication and collaboration with civil affairs offices, educational administrative departments, women's federations, and the Working Committee for the Care of the Next Generation, exploring and promoting professional workforce development, summarizing best practices, and establishing long-term mechanisms. By integrating professional workforce support, social resource coordination and systematic mechanisms, these strategies aim to simultaneously correct early problematic behaviors in left-behind children and restore family education functions. During implementation, experiences and outcomes should be documented to build a database of family education guidance programs and case libraries, providing references for similar cases [14].

6. Conclusion

In summary, to effectively alleviate the family education Dilemmas faced by rural left-behind children, the professional advantages of social work can be fully leveraged. Depending on the specific circumstances, interventions can adopt direct methods such as case work, group work and community work, or indirect methods such as social work administration, social work supervision and social work research, either as single or integrated interventions. During the intervention process, relevant laws and policies in the field of family education should serve as the foundation, while resources from families, schools, societies and government agencies are actively coordinated and integrated, and family education volunteer service teams are actively explored and cultivated to jointly provide personalized, professional, precise and diversified family education guidance services for left-behind children and their families. Such interventions can help parents of left-behind children enhance their awareness of lawful childcare and scientific parenting methods, while constructing an effective social support system for the children and their families. These approaches not only ensure that left-behind children receive adequate care, effective protection and healthy development, but also provide a reference for social workers and family education volunteers in delivering family education guidance services for left-behind children.

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