



## Research article

# Parent–child cohesion, friend companionship and left-behind children’s emotional adaptation in rural China<sup>☆</sup>



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 14 March 2015

Received in revised form 12 June 2015

Accepted 2 July 2015

Available online 17 July 2015

## Keywords:

Left-behind children

Parent–child cohesion

Friend companionship

Emotional adaptation

Resilience

## ABSTRACT

Using cross-sectional data from rural left-behind children aged 10–17 years in the Henan Province of China, the present study examined the roles of father–child cohesion, mother–child cohesion, and friend companionship in emotional adaptation (loneliness, depression, and life satisfaction) among children left behind by both of their rural-to-urban migrant parents compared to those with only a migrating father. The results indicated that the children with two migrating parents were disadvantaged according to their demonstration of depression but not in loneliness or life satisfaction. Both parent–child cohesion and friend companionship were directly associated with, to varying extents, the left-behind children’s emotional outcomes. Moreover, friend companionship moderated the association between father–child cohesion and emotional outcomes among children with two migrating parents, but the moderating effects of friend companionship did not exist among children with only a migrating father. The implications of these findings for interventions directed at left-behind children are discussed.

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## Introduction

In rural China, there are over 61 million children aged 17 years or younger who have been left-behind by one or both parents migrating in search of work in cities (All-China Women’s Federation, 2013). Nationwide, approximately 1 in 5 children in China have experienced family separation as a result of their parents’ rural-to-urban migration. Parent-migrant/other caregiver families and father-migrant/mother caregiver families are common patterns of migrant families in rural China. Although rural-to-urban migrant workers leave their children looking for better jobs to sustain their families and to provide more economic resources for their children (Fan, Su, Gill, & Birmaher, 2010), most of these left-behind children actually live in a situation lacking parental care and nurturance (Jia, Shi, Cao, James, & Tian, 2010; Luo et al., 2008) and may be more likely to suffer abuse and neglect from their caregivers (Cheng et al., 2010; Givaudan & Pick, 2013). In recent years, researchers from many disciplines (e.g., psychology, education, sociology, anthropology) have shown great interest in understanding left-behind children’s healthy growth and well-being. For example, research has examined left-behind children’s emotional, behavioral, and educational outcomes compared to those of children without migrating parents (Fan et al., 2010; Jia et al., 2010; Luo et al., 2008; Wen & Lin, 2012; Wu, Lu, & Kang, 2015). This line of research, however, has focused primarily on the effects of parents’ rural-to-urban migration on left-behind children’s maladaptation. There has been a dearth of work on protective buffers against the vulnerable situations of parental absence. A better understanding of the protective mechanism

<sup>☆</sup> This research was supported by National Project for Educational Sciences Planning in China (Project No. CBA130126).

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may help in the identification of potential opportunities for developing an effective intervention program to improve the wellbeing of left-behind children.

Parental absence, a consequence of parents' rural-to-urban migration, often has considerable emotional costs for their left-behind children (Wen & Lin, 2012). A number of studies have been conducted to test this relationship. Although the empirical results are somewhat mixed, most studies have documented the detrimental effects of parental migration on children's emotion adaptations, such as feelings of loneliness, symptoms of depression and anxiety (Fan et al., 2010; He et al., 2012; Jia & Tian, 2010; Wu et al., 2015), and low levels of life satisfaction and happiness (Fan & Zhao, 2010; Liu & Ouyang, 2010; Su, Li, Lin, Xu, & Zhu, 2012). Moreover, researchers have further explored the differences in developmental outcomes between children with two migrating parents and children with one migrating parent. For example, several studies have found that children with a migrating father encounter less difficulty than children with two migrating parents, such as lower levels of loneliness (Sun, Zhou, Wang, & Fan, 2010) and depression (Wang, Hu, & Shen, 2011) and higher levels of life satisfaction (Fan, Fang, Liu, & Liu, 2009). Some studies, however, have not found any differences in loneliness and life satisfaction between children with two migrating parents and children with one migrating parent (Su et al., 2012; Zhou, Sun, Liu, & Zhou, 2005). Considering the mixed findings for the influences of parent migration status on children's emotional outcomes, further studies are needed to explore the variation of emotional adjustment among left-behind children.

Resilience research suggests that risk factors are predictive of negative outcomes for only approximately 20% to 49% of a given high-risk population (Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 2001), whereas protective factors appear to predict positive outcomes for approximately 50% to 80% of a high-risk population (Lerner et al., 2009). Although growing attention has been given to the wellbeing of left-behind children and the protective factors associated with their resilience, the literature is mainly based on deficit models focusing on left-behind children's problems and risk factors. Moreover, recent resilience research has focused on the social ecologies of resilience and underscored the importance of the cultural context for understanding the resilience (Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2011). Thus, it is critical to identify specific protective factors that may cultivate left-behind children's wellbeing by buffering the negative effects of parents' rural-to-urban migration in rural China.

Parent–child cohesion, the positive aspect of the parent–child relationship, is consistently considered an essential feature in the normal development of children. This cohesion is generally conceptualized as the intimate emotional bonding between a child and his/her parents, which is expressed in terms of feelings of closeness or positive interactions (e.g., talking about worries, joint discussions) within the parent–child system (Zhang & Fuligni, 2006). Numerous studies have provided evidence of the important roles that parent–child cohesion plays in children's adjustment (Lamborn & Felbab, 2003; Parke & Buriel, 2006; Zhang & Fuligni, 2006). Moreover, parent–child cohesion has also been shown to reduce the deleterious effects of stress and to promote adaptive functioning (Formoso, Gonzales, & Aiken, 2000; Johnson, LaVoie, & Mahoney, 2000; Kuntsche & Silbereisen, 2004). With regard to the migrant families in rural China, parents' migration has already changed the parent–child interaction, which is characterized by a long-term and long-distance separation, a lack of face-to-face communication, and low frequency of interactions (Li, 2002; Su et al., 2012). Thus, it is important to examine whether parent–child cohesion has protective effects on the adaptation of children from migrant families in rural China, as observed in the aforementioned studies.

In addition to family, experiences with friends also constitute an important developmental context for children (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). As children become more cognitively independent from their parents from middle childhood to adolescence, friends play an increasing important role in children's lives. With friends' companionship, children not only acquire opportunities for the expression and regulation of affect (Denton & Zarbatany, 1996; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995; Salisch, 2000) and experience the security, emotional support, and confidence provided by social interactions (Wen & Lin, 2012) but also display lower levels of loneliness and depressive symptoms (Parker & Asher, 1993; Rubin et al., 2006). Moreover, the potential therapeutic functions of friendship in the context of adversity were underscored in Sullivan's theory of interpersonal relationships (1953). Indeed, the companionship and support of friends have been found to help children avoid lonely, inadequate, or depressed feelings in contexts of social isolation (Laursen, Bukowski, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007), peer victimization (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Woods, Done, & Kalsi, 2009), and childhood abuse (Powers, Ressler, & Bradley, 2009). Given the increasing importance of friends in children's lives during early adolescence, friends' companionship may be particularly important for left-behind children in adapting to the vulnerable situation of parental absence, especially for children with two migrating parents.

Notably, researchers of child resiliency have found that positive friendship may moderate the relationship between a poor parent–child relationship and children's adjustment outcomes (Gaertner, Fite, & Colder, 2010; Gauze, Bukowski, Aquan-Assee, & Sippola, 1996; Rubin et al., 2004). For example, Gauze et al. (1996) found that a close friendship moderated the relationship between family cohesion and children's self-perceived wellbeing. Rubin et al. (2004) also found that having a strong supportive friendship buffered the negative effects of poor parent–child relationships on children's internalizing problems. These findings are consistent with social provision theory (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985), which suggests that a high quality friendship may serve as compensation for children's adjustment when they experience negative relationships with their parents. However, these studies have focused mainly on children from "normal" families, so the moderating roles of friendship (e.g., friend companionship) on the association between the parent–child relationship and adjustment in children left in their original rural communities by one or both parents have been less examined.

In theory, although the migrant parents can provide more economic resources for their left-behind children, their absence from day-to-day activities does affect children (Wen & Lin, 2012). Thus, by providing left-behind children with

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