

Understanding the Nature of Behavioral and Emotional Problems of Early childhood (3-5 years)

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Abstract

The aim of the present study was to explore the nature of common behavioral and emotional problems of early childhood. Early childhood consists of preschool years which range from 3 to 5 years. School and home environment play major roles in the all-round development of children and can also have a significant role in the emergence of behavioral and emotional problems. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted with 8 teachers of preschool children (3-5 years) and interviews were taken from 7 mothers of children of the same age range. Thematic content analysis was used for interpreting the data. Codes were derived from the data and themes were generated on the basis of codes. Frequencies of the codes were counted. Aggression, inattentiveness, disruptive behavior and defiance were commonly reported behavioral problems while truancy and stubbornness were noticed only by teachers. Carelessness and problematic mobile use were the behavioral problems noticed only by mothers. The percentage of aggression, inattentiveness, disruptive behavior and defiance reported by teachers were 13%, 6%, 14% and 12% respectively while the percentage of these problems reported by mothers were 22%, 14%, 15% and 7%. 8% stubbornness and 6% truancy were reported by teachers. 7% carelessness and 14% problematic mobile use were mentioned by mothers. Fear and shyness were commonly reported emotional problems while withdrawal and separation anxiety was reported only by teachers. The percentage of fear and shyness reported by teachers were 10% and 6% respectively while percentage of the same problems reported by mothers 14% and 7%. 12% withdrawal and 13% separation anxiety were reported by teachers.

Introduction

Behavioural problems refer to inappropriate actions and deeds that are troublesome to others and to the self as well. Emotional problems refer to inappropriate feelings such as sadness, fear, shyness and withdrawal under normal circumstances. Such inappropriate feelings cause difficulty in healthy emotional development. At different developmental stages, students face different developmental task and are expected to fulfill them. Entering into school for the first time itself is a big challenge for children. In preschool (3 to 5 years old), they encounter many challenges such as getting separated from their parents for a few hours, learning turn taking and sitting at a place for a longer period of time. They are now spending time at such a place where they are bound by some rules and norms. Here, in school they are not the centre of attention and each child is treated equally. Students, who adapt to such demanding situations, perform well in school and those who do not, start developing many behavioural and emotional problems. Some children are born with problems hence unable to fulfill such demands and some develop such problems due to threatening environmental setting. Children feel a sense of satisfaction when they deal successfully with the daily challenges of kindergarten class life, including both social (peer related) and academic (content related) challenges. Studies found that children who feel relaxed and well-adjusted in kindergarten class are more likely to experience school success beyond kindergarten than that of those who do not (Thompson, 1975; Ladd & Priece, 1987). 8% to 10% of children younger than 5 years, experience clinically significant mental health problems, which include emotional, behavioral, and social relationship problems. Children with these problems as well as their families go through distress and other challenges which might impair their daily life functioning (Egger et al. 2006). Children with emotional and behavioural problems may demonstrate impairment across multiple domains, including social interactions, problematic parent-child relationships, physical safety, inability to take initiative for a task, academic problems (Kim Cohen, 2005). Studies have emphasized on identifying alternative educational strategies that should be implemented to improve learning opportunities for children with challenging behaviours. Supportive school strategies for children with emotional and behavioural disorders have traditionally focused on classroom management, social skills and anger management, but academically-focused interventions have been receiving greater attention these days (Lane, 2007).

A study examined children out of parental care (220 children) and children under parental care (128 children) in order to have an estimate of prevalence of behavioural and emotional problems in these two groups. Conduct problems was found to be the most prevalent behavioural problem among all the subscales of Strength and Difficulty Questionnaire shown by 48.70% and 84.30% of children of both the groups respectively. This was followed by peer problems (44.60% and 48.30%), emotional problems (33.70% and 55.60%), and hyperactivity problems (26.70% and 32.30%). Significant differences in total difficulty on all subscales, externalizing scores, internalizing scores, and impact scores were found. Significant correlations were found among subscales in both the groups (Dutta et al., 2018). Children of single parents were found to have more behavioural problems as compared to dual parent typical families (Ganesha & Venkatesan, 2012).

Method

In this study, qualitative methods (Focus Group Discussions and interviews) were used in order to understand the nature of common behavioural and emotional problems of early childhood.

Participants: Teachers and Parents were taken as participants because it is difficult for preschool children to express their behavioural and emotional problems due to limited vocabulary. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted with 8 teachers of children (3-5 years) and interviews were taken from 7 mothers of children of the same age range.

Procedure: After taking permission, FGD was conducted with the teachers teaching students of classes K.G to nursery. As teachers spend considerable time in school with students, they were considered to be a reliable source of information about students' behavioural and emotional problems. Purposive sampling was used while recruiting the teachers. The researcher played the role of moderator (facilitator) and an observer was also present for taking notes on the discussion. FGD was held in the staff room of the school where all the teachers sat together around a table. The duration of FGD was 55 minutes. Before conducting the FGD, instructions were given and rapport was established with the teachers of the group. In the first few minutes of the FGD, one teacher tended to dominate the discussion but after five minutes, all the teachers got involved. The discussion was initiated with the following question:

“Kksha me aamtaur par aap logo ne bachcho me kya-kya samasyaen dekhee hain?”

The discussion was audio recorded. At the completion of the FGD, the teachers were thanked for their participation in the discussion. Debriefing was done at the end of the discussion. The researcher gave her contact number and email id to the participants so that she could be contacted in case they had any doubt or queries regarding the discussion. Refreshments were provided to the participants at the end of the discussion.

Before taking interviews with mothers, piloting was done. Key words were generated with the help of the findings of the FGD. These key words facilitated the interview with mothers. Convenience sampling was used while contacting the mothers. Each interview took 40-45 minutes.

Analysis: The recording of the FGD was transcribed line by line and thematic content analysis was used for interpreting the data. In this study, the data were thoroughly read many times before analysis. Subsequently, codes were derived from FGD with teachers of preschool students. Themes were generated. Themes were defined on the basis of codes. The frequency of problems was counted. Percentage of all behavioural and emotional problems was calculated. A similar procedure was followed while analyzing the interviews with parents. Later comparison between teachers' and parents' reports on behavioural and emotional problems was established.

Results

Table No.1. Codes, frequencies and themes of behavioural problems derived from FGD with teachers of early childhood students.

S. No.	Codes	Frequencies	Themes
1	Hitting badly, scratching others, fighting , pushing, hair pulling and snatching others' stuff	10	Aggression
2	Indiscipline in the class, disturbing the class, sitting here and there, going to toilet 4 to 5 times within a period and making excuses to go out of the class	11	Disruptive Behaviour
3	Repeatedly doing something which is forbidden, being insolent in the class	6	Stubbornness

4	Disobeying teachers, unnecessary arguments with teachers and being rude to teachers	9	Defiance
5	Not attending classes regularly, making excuses for being absent	5	Truancy
6	Not paying attention in class, talking in the class	5	Inattentiveness

Table No. 2. Codes, frequencies and themes of emotional problems derived from FGD with teachers of early-childhood students

S. No.	Codes	Frequencies	Themes
1	Remaining quiet in the class, not interacting in the class with anyone, not sharing any problem	9	Withdrawal
2	Clinging to parents while leaving school, crying for parents in the class and asking parents to stay in school	10	Separation anxiety
3	Not answering questions due to fear and avoiding eye contact with teachers	8	Fear
4	Hiding oneself behind other students and not participating in any class activity	5	Shyness

Figure No. 1. Percentage (%) of Behavioural and Emotional problems derived from FGD with teachers of early childhood students.

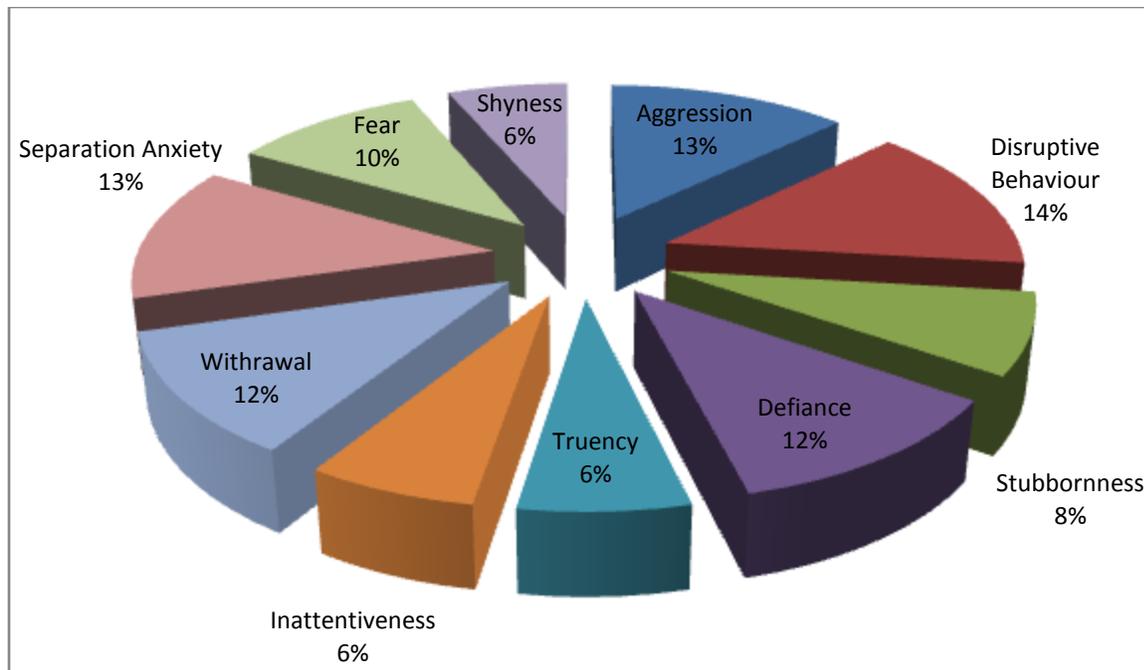


Table No. 3. Codes, frequencies and themes of behavioural problems derived from interviews with parents of early childhood students.

S. No.	Codes	Frequencies	Themes
1	Throwing things, hitting family members, abusing family members and damaging home property	3	Aggression
2	Throwing remote and mobile, complaint of disturbing others in the class while writing and reading	2	Disruptive Behaviour
3	Disobeying parents and arguing with parents	1	Defiance
4	Incomplete school task and careless attitude towards study	1	Carelessness
5	Talking too much in class, not paying attention to the teacher and looking here and there while studying	2	Inattentiveness
6	Playing games on the mobile throughout the day and spending more time on the mobile	2	Problematic mobile use

Table No.4. Codes, frequencies and themes of emotional problems derived from interviews with parents of early childhood students

S. No.	Codes	Frequencies	Themes
1	Not answering questions, not responding to teachers due to fear, not responding to tuition teacher, not responding despite knowing the answer and not coming in front of guests	2	Fear
2	Feeling shy, avoiding interaction with people and hesitating while interacting with people	1	Shyness

Figure No. 2. Percentage (%) of Behavioural and Emotional problems derived from interviews with parents of early childhood students

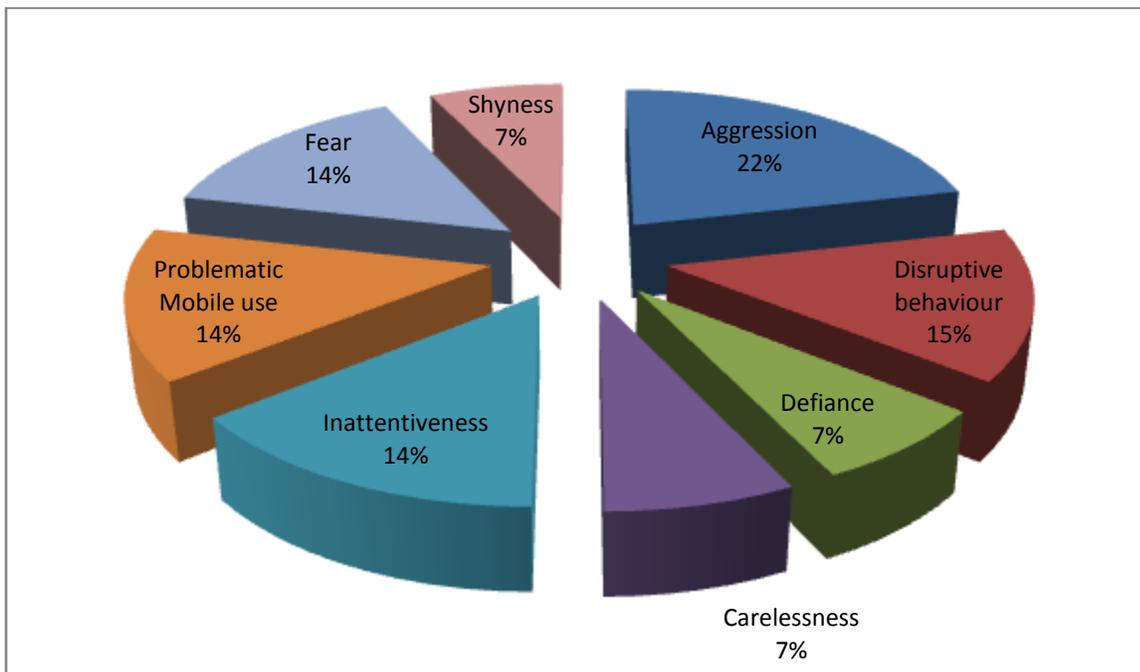


Table No.5. Comparison between parents' and teachers' report on behavioural and emotional problems of early-childhood (3- 5 years)

	Teachers' report	Parents' report		Teachers' report	Parents' report
Behavioural problems	Aggression (13%)	Aggression (22 %)	Emotional problems	Fear (10%)	Fear (14%)
	Inattentiveness (6%)	Inattentiveness (14%)		Shyness (6 %)	Shyness (7%)
	Disruptive behavior (14%)	Disruptive behavior (15%)		Withdrawal (12 %)	
	Defiance (12%)	Defiance (7%)		Separation anxiety (13%)	
	Truancy (6%)				
	Stubbornness (8%)				
		Carelessness (7%)			
		Problematic mobile use (14%)			

On the basis of table no. 5, the following conclusions can be made:

Aggression, inattentiveness, disruptive behavior, and defiance were the commonly reported behavioural problems. Truancy and stubbornness were reported only by teachers and carelessness and problematic mobile use were reported only by parents.

Fear and shyness were the commonly reported emotional problems while withdrawal and separation anxiety were noticed only by teachers.

Discussion

Behavioural Problems:

Aggression, inattentiveness, disruptive behavior and defiance were commonly reported behavioral problems while truancy and stubbornness were noticed only by teachers. Carelessness and problematic mobile use were the behavioral problems noticed only by mothers. The percentage of aggression, inattentiveness, disruptive behavior and defiance reported by teachers were 13%, 6%, 14% and 12% respectively while the percentage of these problems reported by mothers were 22%, 14%, 15% and 7%. 8% stubbornness and 6% truancy were reported by teachers. 7% carelessness and 14% problematic mobile use was mentioned by mothers.

Mothers reported more aggression and inattentiveness and one of the possible reasons behind it could be that mothers spend more time with their children and are good observant of their behavior. A study found that during the preschool years, children tend to manifest instrumental and physical aggression such as snatching toys and pushing a playmate. Hostile aggression (name-calling, criticizing and ridiculing) which is expressed as aggressive behavior directed to others, comes much later, at around 7 years of age (Coie and Dodge, 1998). Studies have suggested that aggression starting at an early age continues throughout development (Shaw et al. 1996; Campbell, 2002). Preschoolers who were prenatally exposed to alcohol showed frequent temper tantrums and had difficulties with transitions (Olson et al, 1992). Ruff and Capozzoli (2003) reported that distractibility decreases over time. Studies have found evidences that ADHD symptoms decrease with maturation of the central nervous system in later childhood and mid adolescence (Shaw et al. 2007).

Harsh punishment in school could be one of the reasons why students become defiant. Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) is also associated with inappropriate functioning in school settings (Greene et al., 2002). ODD in children is predictive of poor parenting practices (Burke, Pardini & Loeber, 2008). Stubbornness (8%) was noticed only by teachers of early childhood students. One of most important causes of stubbornness may be parents' failure to manage children's behavior and negative child-parent interaction (Krueger, 2003). Koenigs (1977) reported that 60% of children's problem behavior such as stubbornness is predictable based on parents' negative, conflicting behavior. Studies on truancy have reported 4.0–70.0 % prevalence rates of school absenteeism as a result of oral problems among children and adolescents aged 5–

15 years (Pongpichit et al. 2008; Shepherd et al. 1999; Naidoo et al. 2001; Jackson et al. 2011; Seirawan et al. 2012; Krisdapong et al. 2013).

Moreover behavioural issues like carelessness and problematic mobile use are context specific. One leading factor that contributes to careless behavior is a heightened level of sensation seeking (Arnett, 1992). Problematic mobile use was noticed only by mothers because children are not allowed to use cell phones in classrooms.

Emotional Problems:

Fear and shyness were commonly reported emotional problems while withdrawal and separation anxiety was reported only by teachers. The percentage of fear and shyness reported by teachers were 10% and 6% respectively while percentage of the same problems reported by mothers 14% and 7%. 12% withdrawal and 13% separation anxiety were reported by teachers.

The difference between the parents' and teachers' report on emotional problems could be due to environmental setting. Some problems are manifested by children in schools and some home. Students who have faced severe and chronic fearful experiences often show poor learning capacities which leads to poor academic and learning performance (Arnsten, 2009). Studies have found that students with fear suffer from insomnia and most of the students stopped going to school due to fear (Cavallaro et al., 2012). Perceived social evaluation is a common cause of shyness in childhood (Crozier, 1995). Shy children are more prone to rate themselves as less attractive and less skillful (Leary, 2001). A study found that withdrawal during childhood and early adolescence is linked to emotional and interpersonal adjustment difficulties, such as anxiety and loneliness (Gazelle and Rudolf, 2004). Separation anxiety which is excessive fear of being separated from parents or caregiver was observed only in early childhood students (13%). Parenting styles and parent-child interactions could be the reasons behind this problem. Factors such as biological and genetic vulnerabilities, temperamental qualities, negative environmental influences and negative attachment experiences and parental psychopathology play a great role in emergence of this emotional problem (Pine & Grun, 1999). Insecure attachment with caregivers and, specifically, anxious/resistant attachment can enhance the risk of childhood anxiety disorders (Manassis & Hood, 1998; Warren et al., 1997).

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