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The Impact of Parenting Styles on Peer Relationships and Social Anxiety in Preschool Children with Autism

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Abstract. The preschool years are a critical period for the development of social skills in children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In inclusive educational settings (such as mainstream kindergartens), these children often face the dual challenges of low peer acceptance and severe social anxiety. Parenting styles directly influence children's social behavior outside the home. This paper reviews recent empirical research, focusing on the specific effects of different parenting styles on peer relationships and social anxiety in children with autism. The research results show that authoritative and warm child-rearing modes can give children enough safe feeling, thus helping them better merge into group environments. On the opposite side, over-protective or authoritative bringing-up modes take away from children the chances to train social abilities, therefore making their shrinking and dread more serious. Therefore, the intervene measures for children who have autism should not be limited within the skill training that is for the children themselves. More emphasis should be put on the enhancement of parenting methods in order to provide support that starts from the level of the family.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), parenting styles, preschool children, peer relationships, social anxiety

1. Introduction

A fundamental hallmark of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) involves enduring impairments in social communication. With the widespread adoption of early screening technologies and the advancement of inclusive education, a growing population of preschool children diagnosed with ASD is currently entering inclusive early childhood education programs. However, due to a lack of effective social skills and the ability to interpret others' nonverbal cues, these children often find themselves on the margins of typical classroom settings. They are highly susceptible to peer isolation or may exhibit severe social withdrawal behaviors as a result of environmental pressures.

For solving this problem, the current existing early intervention research has mainly put focus on making up for skill deficits of the children, for example carrying out pointed social recovery training inside organizations and measuring its effect. But this kind of one-direction method, in large measure, ignores the background of family, which is a vital exterior factor. The preschool stage marks the beginning of children's social development. In addition to shaping children's behavioral

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habits at home, parenting styles directly influence their coping strategies and emotional states in unfamiliar social environments.

This study aims to systematically explore and clarify the specific pathways through which different parenting styles influence peer relationships and social anxiety in preschool children with autism. By elucidating the mechanisms linking the family environment to children's peer-related social adaptability, this research seeks to provide targeted theoretical foundations for the subsequent development of scientifically grounded parent training strategies and the establishment of home-school collaboration early intervention programs.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Social challenges faced by children with autism

ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized primarily by persistent difficulties in social communication and repetitive, rigid patterns of interest and behavior. Lord et al. noted that these children exhibit significant communication difficulties and struggle to accurately interpret others' intentions [1]. Zeidan et al. pointed out that recent surveys indicate approximately 1 in every 100 children worldwide is diagnosed with ASD, and that estimated prevalence rates have been rising over time [2]. Along with the rate of autism diagnosis increasing year by year, together with the rising promotion of inclusive education, all circles of society have given higher attention to whether preschool-age children with autism can smoothly integrate into school environments and to their social development. Therefore, a greater number of children who have autism are entering common kindergartens. However, they encounter very big difficulties when they want to build companion connections inside the classroom. Because of the special brain-knowledge working methods, therefore they have difficulty in holding the normal society rules correctly. The difficulties they have when making friends show themselves through three main methods. Firstly, they discover it is extremely difficult to participate in game activities. Children that develop in normal ways have the ability to use words to ask for borrowing a toy, but children who have autism do not know the way to ask, hence often stretch out hands to grasp it directly, therefore this makes their companions angry and thus causes being left out after a long period. Second, they have difficulty in comprehending delicate hints. For instance, although a frowning face expresses unhappiness, children who have autism frequently cannot identify this kind of body language and may go on doing the same behavior even after other people have got angry. Third, they experience severe social withdrawal. Prolonged experiences of peer rejection can lead children with autism to develop a sense of learned helplessness. These repeated setbacks reinforce their tendency to actively avoid social interactions, causing them to miss out on further opportunities to practice social skills and trapping them in a vicious cycle of increasing isolation.

2.2. The application of family systems theory

Family systems theory posits that the family is an interconnected whole. The way children establish friendships at school is acquired as they assimilate through observation what happens at home. How parents discipline their children determines how those children will treat their classmates outside the home. To children that have autism, the function which parents undertake in their early period of socialization is much more critical and cannot be replaced compared with that for normally developing children. Although normal children are able to obtain knowledge through watching people who are around them, children who have autism discover that it is hard to absorb information

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coming from the external world. Therefore, parents for the large part become the main role models for children who have autism when they study the interactions between people. If parents habitually resort to emotionally charged shouting to resolve issues, children will internalize this coping mechanism and rigidly apply it to their interactions with peers. Conversely, if parents consistently explain matters calmly and rationally, children will gradually learn to communicate in a composed manner. The behavioral and verbal examples set by parents fundamentally shape the children's social interactions in external environments.

2.3. Limitations of existing research

Previous academic attention has largely focused on the psychological development of typically developing children. Although Luo et al. 's study provided a detailed analysis of Chinese parenting styles, its sample was limited to typically developing children, leaving relatively little literature specifically targeting families with autistic children [3]. In addition, past research tended to focus more on the patients' own deficits. Bellini pointed out the link between social skills and anxiety in adolescents with autism [4] Research workers put much energy into cultivating children, yet they frequently ignore the family which is the most key outside environment. If parenting practices at home are not simultaneously optimized, the social skills children initially acquire in intervention programs will struggle to be reinforced and generalized in daily life, significantly diminishing the overall effectiveness of the intervention. The present study addresses this gap by clarifying the specific outcomes of parental discipline styles.

3. The impact of parenting styles on peer relationships

3.1. The promotion function of positive parenting

A positive parenting pattern unites "authoritative" and "emotionally warm" methods. These kinds of parents set up explicit rules, and at the same time they give their children enough emotion-based comfort. Firstly, this kind of warm feeling gives to children a strong feeling of psychological safety. Stable emotional reaction ability and body warmth help the building of deep acceptance feeling inside family. This stable emotion connection therefore helps children who have autism to develop secure attachment relations. This kind of deep-rooted safety feeling can effectively reduce anxiety when children meet strange companions, and it acts as an important psychological precondition for starting social interaction. Second, these father and mother teach their children social abilities one step by one step. For instance, when a child has the wish to play with the toy which belongs to another person, the parent possibly can bend the body low and conduct guidance to them: "Go ask him, 'Can we together carry out playing?'" Through splitting intricate social interactions into simple, short word groups, the probability that the child can obtain learning outcomes increases by a large extent. Research by Hu and Feng confirmed that effective parenting styles lead to more friendly and prosocial behaviors in preschool children [5]. Furthermore, the mother's manner holds key importance. Bauminger and Shulman pointed out that when mothers actively create opportunities for their children to interact with peers on a regular basis, the children are able to make more friends [6]. Under the guidance of their parents, when children study to share and be polite, other children can naturally be more willing to receive them, hence children with autism can gradually integrate into the group.

The Detrimental Effects of Negative Parenting: Negative parenting mainly contains "authoritarian" and "neglectful" types. These two kinds of styles often make social frictions happen

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between autistic children and their peers of the same age. A systematic review by Suvarna et al. clearly indicated that negative parenting and poor parent-child interactions exacerbate externalizing problem behaviors in children with autism [7]. The authoritarian type of parents frequently have no enough patience toward their children, at the same time they require absolutely obedience, this situation greatly limits children's capability to express themselves and do free exploration. Owing to the fact that children who suffer from autism have the tendency to show inflexibility in their behaviors, therefore they possess a higher probability to commit errors. When they have made a mistake, they encounter severe blame and corporal penalty, therefore causing a large quantity of trepidation and wrath to accumulate within their bodies. When they once were in the kindergarten, they give out these negative feelings onto their classmates. The children which have internalized the authoritative power as one standard conflict-solution method in the home environment therefore have the tendency to copy these kinds of hostile reactions when they meet their peers. They possibly at once get angry, even use body force, this thus directly brings about serious refusal from their companion groups. The parenting that does not give enough care also can bring about negative results. Because they suffer serious care giving exhaustion, some parents may pull back in emotion, which therefore brings about a neglectful parent-child interaction pattern. These children have not learned to line up or take turns at home. Upon entering general education classrooms, these children frequently display disruptive behaviors that compromise the overall learning environment. Due to the lack of timely behavioral guidance and positive reinforcement from parents, these children's inappropriate interaction patterns are difficult to correct effectively. Over time, their acceptance among peers in group settings continues to decline, and the risk of marginalization increases significantly.

4. The impact of parenting styles on social anxiety

4.1. The negative effects of overprotection

Regarding the influence of external social environments, Spain et al. found in an empirical study of school-aged children with autism that once placed in crowded or unstructured settings lacking established rules, these children often exhibit anxiety and tension far exceeding typical levels [8]. After they get the information that their own child has obtained the diagnosis, parents frequently have stronger parenting-related anxiety and sensations of self-blame. This compensate-type thought mode can easily cause them to carry out excessively protective behaviors. For instance, these parents often keep unceasing, near monitoring in public places (like amusement grounds) and may even actively interfere for their child's sake in communications with companion children (like lending playthings for them). This kind of excessive participation takes away from children the chance that they can independently carry out social communications and get natural reactions from their companions. Due to the fact that external social difficulties are completely blocked out by parents, children have no ability to construct a collection of methods for coping with social problems in natural environments. When they have to do self-adaptation to unfamiliar groups inside inclusive classrooms, they frequently enter extreme panic and pull back when they meet unexpected situations because they do not have effective coping methods. Research by Pickard et al. demonstrated that insufficient communication skills are themselves a high-risk factor for social anxiety [9]. From the angle of learned helplessness, too much parental interference directly harms the social self-efficacy of children. Specifically, the more frequently parents intervene and take over, the less capable children are of coping independently in real-life interactions, ultimately leading them to avoid social

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environments. Overprotection fails to alleviate anxiety and further deprives children of opportunities for desensitization, which directly intensifies their fear of unfamiliar situations.

4.2. The negative impact of strict and authoritarian parenting

Another group of parents is eager for their children to function like neurotypical individuals. Children with autism have neurodevelopmental limitations in emotional regulation and executive function. Therefore, when external social demands are too high or sensory stimuli are too intense, they are highly prone to emotional breakdowns. These explosive occurrences are neurobiological reactions to pressure, and not intentional behaviors that oppose. Even so, parents who do not have enough knowledge about ASD often misunderstand these outbursts as pure defiance, hence they use strict punishment measures. Parents' long-time high-pressure punishment from parents easily lets children stay in a long-time state of high-alert pressure, which blocks the growth of their emotion adjusting abilities and brings bad influence to their society adaptation. When people are placed in outer social situations, the fear that is bred inside family is inclined to extend widely. These children frequently form high anticipations of negative appraisal, and may even misunderstand neutral conduct from companions as possible indications of censure. For avoiding the expected negative assessments and blames, they usually use defensive evasion methods like quietness or retreat. Research by Lei et al. revealed that, in order to cope with external social pressures and conceal their inner fears, individuals with autism often develop a defense strategy known as "social camouflaging"—that is, passively mimicking the behaviors and communication patterns of neurotypical people to protect themselves from negative judgment [10]. This indicates that strict discipline which has not understanding and tolerance can not teach children social skills, and therefore it exacerbates their deep-rooted fear for social interaction through the way of reinforcing the memories based on fear.

5. Comprehensive discussion

5.1. Analysis of core mechanisms

To gain a deeper understanding of how positive parenting approaches improve the social challenges faced by children with autism, the mechanisms of action can be analyzed across the following three dimensions. Firstly, it is the supply of one safe emotional shelter. A safe and quickly reacting family environment provides children a space in which they are permitted to commit errors. When they encounter setbacks during the interactions with companions, they themselves know that they can withdraw back to the safe home to seek comfort. This kind of safe feeling can reduce their worried mood when they go outside.

This sense of security alleviates their anxiety when they are outside. Second is providing emotional guidance. When a child has an emotional breakdown, parents do not immediately blame them but instead proactively validate the child's emotional distress. This acceptance teaches the child to gradually process negative emotions rather than venting them through aggression. Third is personally modeling social interaction. Parents demonstrate at home cooperative behaviors such as turn-taking and resource-sharing. Once children understand these social skills, they exhibit greater confidence in external social environments. Conversely, negative parenting styles undermine these three mechanisms. Authoritarian parenting plunges children into fear through constant high-pressure punishment; neglectful parenting, by withdrawing emotional support and social modeling, directly cuts off children's pathways to learning interpersonal interaction. Although these two negative

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patterns manifest differently, they ultimately severely impair the development of children's social skills, trapping them in a vicious cycle of social isolation and withdrawal.

5.2. Comparison with typical children

While neurotypical children can often offset domestic distress by securing emotional backing from preschool friends, such external compensatory mechanisms are largely unavailable to children with ASD. Due to their lack of proactive social skills, they often face rejection outside the home. Consequently, they rely on their parents' emotional support far more than typical children. If their parents' discipline deviates significantly, these children can find themselves completely isolated and helpless.

5.3. Inferences for interference practices

At present, very many special education places put priority on child-focused, one-sided ability obtaining—a theory model that on structure ignores the child's wider development surroundings. For solving these insufficiencies, special education organizations must by all means take structured parent guiding programs as one core component of their working methods. In the actual doing, this can include adding family intervention modules from Pivotal Response Treatment (PRT) or the Early Start Denver Model (ESDM), with the focus on teaching to parents parent-child interaction skills, mood adjustment methods, and everyday communication ways. This therefore makes that family nurturing behaviors in home keep highly consistent with the rehabilitation targets of the organization. Beyond their traditional nurse roles, parents have to act as important promoters, leading their kids to set up the social abilities which are needed for successful joining in. In the final analysis, the building of true peer relationships in inclusive classrooms depends greatly on the smooth matching between family upbringing methods and school system measures.

6. Conclusion

The home internal parental disciplinary practices form the early behavior patterns of autism children, and thus directly decide their social interaction quality and emotional stability in outside social groups. A kind of authoritative and emotion-supporting child-cultivating method can give children a strong feeling of psychological safety and teach them specific social contact methods, therefore effectively easing their social nervousness and breaking the circle of peer separation. On the opposite side, no matter if it comes from over-protection that is pushed by a make-up thought pattern, anxious rule-keeping, or mood ignoring that comes from parent tiredness, these ways take away from children the chances to themselves meet social difficulties in many different aspects, hence thus greatly making worse their being left out and worry in inclusive education places.

Although current investigation has already verified the cross-section connection between child-rearing modes and kids' social behaviors, therefore it still needs to be waited and seen whether interfering in parents' actions can obtain long-term good advantages. In the research of future, scholars must build large-scale long-time tracking models to monitor the real development paths of peer interactions between autistic children when they go into elementary school after the changes of family parenting methods. In the same time, for the purpose of robustly verifying the causal influences of different kinds of parental guidance projects upon the promotion of children's social abilities, it is especially necessary that future research works adopt strict randomized controlled trial (RCT) designs. Moreover, the academia ought to put emphasis on establishing standardized social

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ability and peer reception evaluation scales which are especially made for preschool-period children with autism, hence effectively promoting the comparability of results among separate research works. The results of these research directions therefore will give a more strict scientific foundation for the making of special education policies and the optimization of family support intervention patterns.

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