EXPLORING SOCIAL SKILL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FOSTERED AND HOUSED CHILDREN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aimed to explore the difference of social skills between fostered children and housed children.

Design of the study: Comparative Research Design was used in the study.

Place and Duration of the study: The study took place in Pakistan Sweet Home and Public Schools of Islamabad.

Sample and Method: The sample for the current study consisted of 200 children, 50 of whom were foster children with an equal gender distribution (50 foster males and 50 foster females) and 50 of whom were housed children with an equal gender distribution (50 housed males and 50 housed females). On the basis of a purposive sampling technique, the sample was chosen. The demographic sheet was utilized to obtain socio demographic data from the participants, and Social skills of fostered and housed children were measured by using Social Skills Scale (khan & Pervez, 2009).

Results and Conclusion: According to the results of the independent sample t-test, children who live in their own homes have better social skills than those who are fostered. Also, it was discovered that there are substantial gender disparities between boys and girls in terms of social abilities (p =.009). The study will be helpful for clinical purposes since it may have therapeutic and counseling ramifications that will improve children's social skills with the ultimate goal of eradicating many other social issues from society.

Keywords: Housed children; Fostered children; Social skills; Social issues

INTRODUCTION

Human beings as sociable creatures have a natural desire to communicate their messages, thoughts and feelings with one another. After birth, child starts to communicate through various ways and continues to do so all his life which enables the child to develop relationships. The interacting abilities of an individual, which give birth to and help maintain positive social relationships, are considered as one's social skills. The acquisition of social skills does not happen overnight. These skills start to develop since after early childhood through interaction and association with family, friends and other individuals and this process of social learning continues throughout life. It is essential to lay the foundations of socializing, by teaching the skills at home at very early stages. As most children grow older, they usually interact in situations where presence of their parents is not always possible. Drawing from what they learn at home, children make friends within their peer group and soon learn more about socializing, ideally refining their social skills as they grow older.

Social Skills can be defined as the ability to express feelings or to communicate interest and desire to others (Lieberman , 1975). The type of environment a child is provided from his/her early childhood to late childhood plays a great role in the development of these skills.

In today's era, with the growing trend of foster homes children are being nurtured at various shelter places. Such shelter places commonly known as foster homes are organizations which provide opportunities for children to build their future, to get education ultimately nurturing them with healthy child development. Various studies have indicated the vital importance of the role of parents in the development of their children (Collins et al , 2000). Children's development comprises of many aspects of parenting, social development being one of those. The most salient predictors of children's social development are found to be parental warmth and sensitivity (Early Child Care Research Network, 2003). Social skill development begins as soon as the child is born and continues through all the years of accomplishing developmental milestones. It is a reciprocal and bidirectional relationship between a child's individual characteristics such as temperament and the environment with parental warmth, family setup, and friends being the contributors. Children begin developing social skills within the context of the parent-child attachment relationship (Rubin et al, 2006). It is from the parent child relationship that children learn to read emotional cues, stabilize their personal emotions and behavior, and assimilate the responses of their parents into their own experiences with society and situations

(Thompson & Lagattuta, 2006). Parent-child attachment relationship's existence alone does not contribute to it in fact the quality of the relationship is yet another predictor of children's social skills development. Research supports that having a secure attachment with a parent develops strong self-regulatory skills and makes children express emotion effectively (Calkins, 2004). Moreover, it has also been proven by the findings of a study on foster children which highlights that children with multiple caregivers are more likely to display insecure attachments and indiscriminate friendliness indicating weak social skills (Chisholm, 1998).

Interpersonal skills which include performing competently in social situations, cooperating, sharing, interacting positively etc, are of vital importance for social adjustment in childhood and adolescence. Research has found that interpersonal skills are important for peer acceptance and social adjustment throughout childhood and adolescence (Masten et al., 2005). Another study indicated that poor interpersonal skills (e.g., externalizing problems) in childhood, predicted academic problems in adolescence, which in turn led to internalizing problems in adulthood (Masten et al., 2005). Hence, promoting interpersonal skills in young children and adolescents is one way to ensure strong social and academic skills.

Taking a closer picture of foster homes, no matter how perfect they try to do, every setup certainly lack on few aspects which ultimately contribute in the shaping and nourishment of the children. A study on orphans and vulnerable children highlighted the demographic and behavioral predictors that influenced the psychosocial health of orphans. Results found that children outside of the home either as orphans, laborers etc. were particularly vulnerable to psychosocial distress. In addition, the study indicated that differences in lifestyle and their residing places majorly contributed to the subjects' psychosocial outcomes (Zhou , 2012). Another study suggests that children in foster homes without their biological parents have higher rates of depression, poorer social skills, lower adaptive functioning, and more externalizing behavioral problems, such as aggression and impulsivity (Clausen et al, 1998).

In previously documented literature little attention has been paid to the comparison of social skills between foster children and housed children, especially in Pakistan no previous study has been found covering the same theme. Although work has been done on the development of social skills, similarly role of environment and living style in the development of such skills has also been studied (Rao & Murray, 2007) but the difference in social skills due to the difference in nurturance and presence of family needs to be studied.

(Calkins, 2004). The major objectives of the current study were to examine the difference in levels of social skills between fostered and non- fostered children and also to study the gender differences in levels of social skills. As indicated previously that environment, family, warmth all play an important role in development of social skills since very early stages of childhood, thus present study investigates whether children who are fortunate enough to get nurtured by their true parents differ in their social skills to those children who lack that warmth and upbringing rather reside at foster care centers. Furthermore, the study aims to identify the role of parenting in development of social skills, at the same time facilitating the foster homes by highlighting their lacking areas in social upbringing in order to enhance positive social behavior in children by providing them with the closest to how family life and home environment is.

Hypotheses

The following set of hypotheses has been brought out based on the literature:

1. Housed children will have high level of social skills than fostered children.
2. Female's children will have high level of social skills than male children.

METHOD

Participants

The sample, comprising 200 students, was selected through a purposive sampling approach. Specifically, 100 students were selected from foster care settings, while the other 100 were chosen from public schools, specifically targeting grades 1 through 8. Within each group, an equal ratio of males and females was maintained. These participants were drawn specifically from Pakistan Sweet Home and Islamabad Public Schools. Only children aged between 6 and 13 years (M= 10; SD= 2.52) were eligible for inclusion, with those falling outside this age range excluded from consideration. Notably, the medium of instruction in both types of institutes was Urdu. Furthermore, all participants self-identified with Pakistani nationality and practiced the Muslim faith.

Measures

Demographic Sheet:

Demographic sheet was used to gather socio-demographic information from the participants such as age, gender, type of living (Fostered/Housed), and information related to single orphan or double orphan.

Social Skills Scale (SSS) (Khan & Pervez, 2009)>

Social Skills Scale was used to measure the social skills in the participants. The scale consists of 52 items, to be scored on 4 points Likert scale ranging from Never to be scored as 0 to Always as 3. The total score on this scale is an aggregate of the categories on all the items. The possible scores range is 0 (minimum) to 156 (maximum). High scores on each subscales is indicative of more of that social skills and overall high score on all subscales reflect better possession of social skills.

Procedure

The study employed a comparative research design to examine the differences between fostered and housed children. Data was collected from participants, including feedback from their parents and teachers, using a purposive sampling technique in classroom settings at both foster homes and public schools. Ethical considerations, in line with the American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines, were followed, ensuring that confidentiality and the right to withdraw from the study at any time were respected. Ethical permission was obtained from the relevant authorities before data collection, and consent forms and demographic sheets were completed by the participants' parents and teachers, considering their living situation. The participants were then administered the Social Skills Scale. Descriptive statistics were employed in SPSS to analyze demographic variables, while the study's hypotheses were assessed using a t-test, a statistical technique used to compare means between two groups.

RESULTS

Table 1
Demographic Variables in terms of Frequency and Percentage (N = 200)

Variables	F	%
Gender		
Male	100	50
Female	100	50
Age (Years)		
6-8	74	37
9-13	126	63
Type of Living		
Fostered	100	50
Housed	100	50
Type of Orphan		
Single Orphan	100	50
Double Orphan	100	50

Table 2
Comparison of mean (t-test) between male and female children (N = 200)

Variable	Male (n=100)		Female (n=100)		$t(198)$	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Social Skills	147.97	18.80	154.67	17.14	-2.63	.009	0.37

Table 2 shows the mean, standard deviation and t value of social skills for males and females. The mean and standard deviation for males was 147.97 and 18.80 respectively. The mean and standard deviation for females was 154.67 and 17.14 respectively. The t value was -2.63 with $p = 0.009$. Females show high social skills than males.

Table 3

Comparison of mean (t-test) between housed and fostered children on the level of social skills(N = 200)

Variables	Housed (n=100)		Fostered (n=100)		t(198)	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Social Skills	154.88	19.41	147.76	16.34	2.80	.006	0.37

Table 3 shows the mean, standard deviation and t value of social skills for housed and fostered children. The mean and standard deviation for housed children and 19.41 respectively. The mean and standard deviation for fostered was 147.76 and 16.34 respectively. The t value was 2.80 with p = 0.006. Results indicate that housed children have high social skills than fostered children.

DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to examine levels of social skills between the children living in houses and those who live at foster homes. The comparison was made using statistical analysis. Results indicated a significant t value as per the hypothesis proposed for the study. Findings indicate that children living in housed environments have high social skills as compared to those living at foster homes. Previous literature has well documented results that suggest that parents play a vital role in the development of their children (Collins et al., 2000). Studies propose that although many aspects of parenting are important for children's development, parental warmth and sensitivity have emerged as two of the most salient predictors of children's social development (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2006).

The level of attachments between a parent and a child determines children's social skills. Various researches report that children with secure attachment with parents express emotions effectively ultimately developing strong self- regulatory skills. Moreover, attachment studies report the importance of the child's behavior which help in shaping the attachment relationship. (Calkins, 2004).

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The findings of the study are supported by a previous research which reports that girl's social behavior is high in frequency and duration as compared to that of males (Kandalla & Bhat, 2010). Findings of a research work supports that female children retain advanced social skills and behavior since at the time of joining school they hold advanced social skills which with time grows to an even advanced level. Furthermore, another research findings state that girls take the lead over boys on levels of social skills (DiPrete & Jennings, 2012).

Hence, by the above mentioned studies we see that both the proposed hypotheses have been proved with significant results. However, it has been found that not a lot of work has been done on social skills of children especially with fostered children being the subject of study in either Western or Asian countries although social skills of special children especially autistic children have been given greater importance in the area of research. Since the current study provides a ground to the future researches to work upon and improve the areas which could not be looked upon. The current study also opens a new door of exploration towards behavior studies of foster children.

Conclusion

The study found that children in traditional households exhibit higher social skills compared to those in foster care, echoing the importance of parental warmth and attachment in social development. Gender differences were also noted, with girls displaying more advanced social behaviors than boys. This study underscores the need for more research on the social skills of foster children and opens avenues for further exploration and intervention in this overlooked area of study.

Limitations and Recommendations

Every research ultimately ends up with some suggestions because of certain limitations of the study; similarly, this research has several also. The results are specific to student sample from one foster home and public school situated in one geographical area and may not be generalized on general population. It is however recommended that more schools especially private and public both, and settings other than schools should be approached for collection of data from housed population and for foster homes. In order to cover a variety of living styles and work setups, more than one foster home should be approached. Moreover, for future studies more demographic variables can be added in order to get a broader picture of factors contributing to the levels of socials skills between foster and housed children.

Despite its limitations, this study has significant implications for enhancing social skills among fostered children. The study recommends that fostered children should be encouraged to engage in social interactions, activities, and peer play in order to improve their social skills. It is suggested that workshops should be conducted for fostered children to teach them various techniques, such as social skills training, positive reinforcement, and supportive caregiving, which can help them develop a sense of trust and security. The findings of this study may be relevant for Asian countries such as Pakistan, where the establishment of residential foster care facilities is still developing. The results may also have important clinical implications, as counseling and therapeutic interventions can help improve the social skills of children and ultimately contribute to addressing various societal problems.

In addition, it is also recommended to advocate for policy changes aimed at addressing the social and emotional needs of foster children, alongside their academic progress. This includes advocating for increased resources for mental health support and specialized interventions. Additionally, there is a call for further research to explore the unique challenges faced by foster children, particularly in Western and Asian contexts. Practical interventions such as workshops for authorities, foster parents, and educators are proposed to provide guidance on nurturing positive parent-child relationships and implementing strategies to enhance social skill development in foster children. Furthermore, the importance of parental warmth and sensitivity in shaping children's social development should be highlighted, along with addressing gender differences in social behavior and their implications for interventions. Overall, these suggestions aim to promote the well-being and social development of foster children and lay the groundwork for future research and advocacy efforts in this area.

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