

## Unrevealed Truths About Normal Families: A Clinician's Learning and Reflections from Family Work

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### Abstract

*A child's survival and development are greatly influenced by their parents and family. Hong Kong is a cosmopolitan and civilized city, where most parents recognize dysfunctional or toxic families, such as those trapped in extreme poverty or with ineffective parents due to their suffering from severe mental illnesses. The author, an experienced counseling psychologist, has seen many families or individuals who suffer in different ways, even though they come from seemingly healthy and normal families. Four types of families that underwent counseling were explored and discussed in this paper, namely families with a single child, overly closely attached families, immigrant families, and families with maritally unhappy mothers. A case study was also included to illustrate how parents and families can reconcile their family rupture and restore children's mental health. This paper intends to enhance parents' awareness and recognition of their power and influence over their children and to provide insight for practitioners who may have frequent contact with such families.*

*Keywords: family work, child development, family influences*

### Background

The importance of family to a child's development cannot be overstated. Voluminous research has consistently demonstrated the importance of a supportive and nurturing environment to a child's physical, emotional, and cognitive development (e.g., Grusec, 2011; Roostin, 2018; Thompson & Meyer, 2007). First and foremost, children acquire security and stability from their families, which enables them to trust others and themselves and gain a sense of self-confidence (Karpel, 1986; Meins, 1997; Waters & Cummings, 2000). Additionally, children learn critical social skills, such as communication, empathy, and cooperation, which will be crucial to their social inclusion later in life (Morris et al., 2007; Roostin, 2018). A child's long-term academic success and successful educational attainment are significantly influenced by parents' guidance, support, and

encouragement (e.g., Aunola & Nurmi, 2005; Steinberg et al., 1992). By receiving comfort, understanding, and acceptance from their families, children learn to cope with stress and navigate challenges (Armstrong et al., 2005; Juang & Silbereisen, 1999).

### Introduction

A toxic family environment is often characterized by traumatizing, abusive, or controlling behaviors, poor communication, and a lack of support and empathy (Goldenberg et al., 2016). It is nonetheless crucial to acknowledge that even in seemingly healthy and normal families, certain vulnerabilities may exist that, while not overtly dangerous, certainly warrant attention. The author aims to shed light on these subtle vulnerabilities within normal family structures, emphasizing the need for increased awareness and understanding among parents.

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### **The Overly Stressed Only Child**

From a positive perspective, only children enjoy the privilege of having all their parents' attention and time and do not have to suffer from the effects of dethronement, because they have no siblings to compete with. Some noticeable disadvantages may be a lack of experience regarding sharing, compromising, resolving conflicts, or initiating perspective taking, which are vital essential life skills in today's society. In fact, only children are very lonely. Despite having plenty including food, toys, etc., only children lack playmates who can spontaneously initiate fights but also accompany them to grow, become lifelong friends, and form family bonds.

An increasing number of only children suffer from the invisible burden of parental expectations. Parents of only children may devote a lot to their children, prioritizing their children's future development and career success. Therefore, children may easily feel pressured academically, socially, and in other areas regardless of their parents' socioeconomic status or educational level. This pressure could become overwhelming, leading to prolonged stress or anxiety. It may precipitate mental health challenges for a child or adolescent or even lead to self-harm or even suicide (Lai & McBride-Chang, 2001). When there is no good parent-child relationship, parents' resources and sacrifices can cause children to deviate from the expected growth trajectory, robbing them of happiness or even causing mental illness.

### **Too Closely Attached Families and Enmeshed Children**

Having close relationships within a family can give children security, support, and love. However, too much closeness can be harmful; children need independence throughout their development. A family that is too closely connected may experience enmeshing, where individual identities are unclear, and family members have difficulty distinguishing their own thoughts, feelings, and desires from those of others (Rask et al., 2003). As children from closely attached families grow, they often have mixed feelings. Although they enjoy the false happiness of being together with family and the freedom to bear no responsibilities for made decisions, they would have to accept the loss of autonomy, critical thinking, and the ability to separate their emotions and values, all at an inevitable cost. As they attempt to assert their independence and autonomy, they may be overcome with anxiety and guilt (Maysel & Scharf, 2009). Extreme family attachment is common in collective cultures, where

self-interest and independence are discouraged because individuation may cause discomfort for families (Yau & Smetana, 1996). Children in such families usually surrender to their sense of family loyalty and guilt and pause their individuation. Because they suppress their own emotions and undifferentiated thoughts for a long time, the adverse consequence emerges in adulthood when they face society on their own. High social anxieties may result from the need for approval or fear of disappointing others. Individuals in this category may end up in a great deal of distress and, paradoxically, feel very lonely due to a lack of genuine understanding from their family members.

### **Immigrated Families and Unindividualized Children**

An increasing number of immigrant families are moving from mainland China and other countries into Hong Kong. The characteristics of the immigrant children have not been adequately understood. Immigrant families may find it challenging to adapt to a new culture while maintaining a congruent cultural identity. Moving to a new place often means leaving behind familiar surroundings, social connections, and social resources. Parents who migrate to a new culture usually bear the immense stress of rearing their children by themselves, while juggling their jobs and basic daily matters. Such situations usually result in very close family bonds, and parents often become very united. Children in such families are usually watched, or even scrutinized, closely by their parents. Parents usually bear an unspoken anxiety that their children will be contaminated by alien cultural influences. Unresourceful parents may even project their cultural insecurity and anxieties onto their children, unintentionally conveying messages such as, "The outside world is dangerous. Nobody will understand or accept you like we do." However, younger family members normally assimilate to new cultures more quickly than their elders, which can create conflicts between generations, and children may feel punished. Such immigrant children who adapt to a new culture more easily than their parents feel guilty and betrayed by their loving parents; eventually, they may ask for a pause on their acculturation process (Kwak, 2003). It is possible that they would unconsciously reject anything related to their new culture, including learning the new dialect or socializing with new people. Therefore, a rigid family structure surfaces, and unindividualized children suffer as a result (Constantine, 1986)

### **Maritally Unhappy Mom and Emotionally Parentified Children**

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A neglected and unconcerned wife is usually depressed. Some parents believe that marital issues should remain between husbands and wives; the quality of their marriage should not affect their children in any way; and maintaining one's marriage is the greatest gift responsible parents can give to their children. This has not been the case for most families the author has encountered. Often, in the counseling room, the author notices that when wives feel unvalued, unloved, or unsupported by their husbands, their suppressed sadness, bitterness, and pain are felt and absorbed by their children. Sons endure more suffering than daughters, according to the author's clinical observations. A son may be overly attentive to their mother during early childhood. Although a son cannot solve their parents' problems, they try to always be immediately available to attend to mothers' emotional needs. In the process, they might act as surrogate husbands for their suffering mothers, obstructing their own development. Consequently, these children become very sensitive and internally torn apart, resenting their irresponsible fathers yet simultaneously loving them. Sons ultimately suppress their own desire to be loved, accepted, or admired by their fathers no matter their age. To protect their mothers, they become emotionally parentified children who sacrifice their independence and personal development (Byng-Hall, 2008). A 28-year-old young man once said, "I am too exhausted to meet girls. It has already taken all my energy to get my mother better and reach out to her." Children who have been extremely loyal to their mothers usually stop attending school (school refusal), become hidden youths (*hikikomori*), or develop a mental illness. These are common cases in family therapy and psychotherapy.

## Implication

The purpose of this paper is not to threaten parents or criticize them, but to encourage them. It is never easy to raise a child. An old African proverb says, "It takes a whole village to raise a child." Raising and parenting a child is probably the hardest task on earth. However, it is undeniably one of the most valuable and meaningful activities in people's lives. The purpose of this paper is to increase parents' knowledge and mindfulness when raising children and provide insights to professionals who have a passion and mission to unmask families' resources and strengths, while remaining mindful of possible challenges families may face. In the following case study, the author illustrates how the aforementioned types of family vulnerabilities can exist. It presents how ruptures can impact a child's mental health and families' resourcefulness and resilience.

## Case Illustration

### *Demographic Data, Referring Information, and Presenting Problem*

A few personal details have been disguised to protect the client's identity. The identified patient was Ming. He was an 11-year-old primary school fifth grade boy living with his biological parents in a public housing estate. His class teacher referred Ming to the school-based psychologist due to his school avoidance tendency. His increasing truancy rate warranted the school's attention.

Ming was the only child in his family. His parents met 13 years prior in Guangdong, China. Ming's mother moved to Hong Kong after her marriage, and Ming was born two years after his parents got married. Ming's mother was a full-time housewife, while his father was a small firm owner who had to work in the mainland more than half a year. Throughout the years, Ming's mother was his primary caregiver, and he called her "the most intimate family member and best friend".

### *Assessment and Observation*

During the intake session with Ming's family, Ming sat quietly next to his mother most of the time. His parents did not communicate much with each other. However, Ming's father frequently tried to advise his son to sit properly, answer the psychologist's questions in a better manner, etc.

Ming's father expressed his understanding of his son's school avoidant behaviors in response to the presenting issue. He attributed the problem to his son's low self-discipline; Ming had trouble waking up on time. As he heard his father's words, Ming remained silent and appeared emotionless. Ming's mother immediately asked her husband mockingly to help wake up their son, so that Ming would not attend school late or miss school altogether. In response, Ming's father said he had to work and that getting up on time was Ming's own responsibility. Ming's father started to complain that Ming never listened to him because his wife "had over-spoiled" their son. In response, Ming's mother became irritated and verbally aggressive. There was a clear conflict between the couple, and Ming was trying both verbally and physically to calm his mother. Ming was very observant of his mother, and he appeared extremely sad when he saw her sobbing.

### *Preliminary Clinical Impression*

The systemic family orientation views family

as an interconnected system in which all members contribute to the presenting problem (Cox & Paley, 2003). In Ming's case, instead of his academic ability (his teachers confirmed that his performance was above average), his initial family intake session showed that Ming was reactive to the relationships within his family. It was evident that Ming was sensitive to the emotional experience of his mother. His mother's suffering was more intolerable for him than being blamed or criticized by his father. The mother and son formed a solid subsystem in which his father was excluded.

### *Critical Intervention Milestones*

When the family dynamic was clearer, the immediate task was to invite Ming's parents to recognize and understand Ming's presenting needs from a family relationship perspective. When Ming's voice was empowered, he displayed above-average maturity and insight. He articulated that he was concerned about his mother. When his mother was with him, he saw her loneliness and sadness. He felt sorry and guilty, thinking he was the only reason his mother was still married to his father and forced to live in Hong Kong (all maternal relatives were on the mainland). Ming could tell that his mother was unhappy about his father's constant absence. Thus, he thought he had to make her happy. The depressed mood of his mother also concerned him, so he said, "If I have to choose, I would stay at home with her."

The parents realized that, despite their child's apparent lack of responsibility for his schoolwork, Ming was overburdened with caring for his family. His parents appreciated hearing their son's inner voice and promised to repair their relationship. Ming's father was willing to spend more time in Hong Kong with his wife, and Ming's mother agreed to encourage her son to pursue his own interests instead of always accompanying her. The most valuable take-away from this experience for Ming's parents was realizing their child was much more sensitive and mature than they had thought. They did not realize that parents' poor marital relationship quality could precipitate children's truancy behavior in school. As parents, they realized their responsibility transcended providing their child's daily necessities but also included providing a solid emotional base for their spouses. Ming's father admitted that if he could not take good care of his wife, he would not be able to get close to his son. A month later, Ming's father sent a message to the author indicating that he felt he had gradually won over his son through their valuable time spent together physically and online as well as his connection with his wife.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, four types of family vulnerabilities have been discussed, which are common in non-clinical settings such as individual or family counseling sessions. In contrast to commonly recognized patterns in dysfunctional families, seemingly normal or healthy families can also unintentionally create problematic individuals or cause mental health distress in individuals. Particularly in present Hong Kong, where it is with high competition and low birth rates, double-income families are increasing numerically and are progressively influenced by child rearing and parenting values of Western and Eastern cultures. Besides enhancing parents' awareness about raising families and providing insights for practitioners regarding family work, this paper calls for more systematic and evidence-based studies on family vulnerability and resilience.

### **摘要**

#### **關於普通家庭的未揭真相：一位心理學家在家庭工作中的學習與思考**

父母和家庭深深影響孩子的生存和成長。本文探索並討論了四種香港日趨普遍的家庭類型，即獨生子女家庭、關係過於緊密的家庭、移民家庭和母親婚姻不幸福的家庭，闡述這些家庭如何不經意影響了孩子的發展。本文還通過一個案例研究，記錄了家庭如何修補裂痕、幫助孩子恢復身心健康的過程。

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