

A Survey on the Status Quo of Sex Education for Left-Behind Children in Rural Areas: A Case Study of Rural Areas in Southern Hunan Province

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Abstract. Objective: To understand the status quo of sex education in left-behind children in rural areas. Method: Self-compiled questionnaires on sex education for left-behind children, teachers and general public and an interview questionnaire were administered to the target respondents. A total of 471 valid copies of questionnaire were retrieved, along with some interview data. Results: (1) There was a general lack of sex knowledge among left-behind children and hence a deficiency of the ability and consciousness to protect themselves; (2) School-based sex education was inadequate, and teachers believed that sex education should be strengthened at school; (3) There was a serious lack of family sex education, while the general public showed growing concern for sex education. Conclusion: It is necessary to strength sex education among left-behind children in rural areas from various dimensions, so as to elevate their sex knowledge and awareness about sexual health. The coordinated promotion by schools, families and society is an inevitable choice and an important measure to improve the effect of sex education.

Keywords. rural areas, left-behind children, sex education

1. Introduction

Along with the acceleration of China's urbanization, a large number of rural residents move to urban areas, resulting in an increasing number of left-behind children in rural areas [1]. Left-behind children are children who remain in rural regions of the country while both parents leave home to earn a living or one parent leaves home and the other cannot exert guardianship. These children are juveniles aged below 16 with rural residency and do not live with their parents [2]. Compared with their urban counterparts, left-behind children in rural areas are much more vulnerable to sexual assault due to the lack of guardianship, family care and protection, and children's inability to protect themselves and discern sexual assault[3]. The urgent task is to conduct surveys on the status quo of sex education for left-behind children in rural areas and help them establish a self-defense mechanism against sexual assault. We conducted a series of surveys and researches in rural areas of southern Hunan Province,

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aiming to understand the status quo of sex education and sexual cognition among left-behind children in rural areas and analyzing the problems existing in sex education among left-behind children. We intended to find new solutions to the socialization of sex education for left-behind children. A sex education platform for children may be built in the future based on our survey findings. The current survey notifies the general public about the importance of developing effective approaches to sex education for children and finally contributes to the healthy growth of children in rural areas, thereby promoting the development of rural education and rural culture construction.

Researches on the problem of left-behind children is mainly focused on basic education, mental health, individual safety, types of guardianship, emotional life, socialization difficulties, scale, distribution and left-behind girls, but there is little research literature on "sex education for rural left-behind children". It can be seen that the current domestic research on this area needs to be improved, and specific feasible countermeasures need to be proposed for the problems related to sex education of rural left-behind children.

Sex education is an important course concerns the health and happiness of children throughout their lives. After a century of exploration and development, systematic theories of sex education has formed in some foreign developed countries. A comprehensive education system of sex education content has established and was integrated into the teaching of different age groups[4]. Cheng Zizhen (2017) argues that rural children have a great demand for sex education during puberty, but the main bodies such as families, schools and village committees are in the absence of sex education for children, guardians lack awareness of sex education, and school sex education is vacant[5]. Liao Qinxiang (2019) argues that left-behind children lack systematic and reasonable ways to actively acquire sex knowledge, and lack the necessary self-protection awareness when they encounter sexual abuse[6]. LiYi (2022) believes that the primary strategy to prevent sexual assault is to raise students' awareness of sexual assault prevention. In terms of intervention mechanism, a multidimensional system should be constructed to identify potential offenders for early detection and prevention. Actively promote sexual assault prevention methods and the laws[7]. Zhang Xiaobing (2019) believes that sexual assault prevention education for parents and protection for left-behind children should be strengthened, emphasizing the refinement of responsibilities in terms of prevention and control countermeasures[8]. Liu Renfeng (2019) believes that education on children's sexual knowledge should be strengthened while strengthening the punishment for sexual crimes against left-behind children[9].

These studies have contributed to the development of children's sex education, but there are also some shortcomings. The research on rural children's sex education must gradually deepen to the theoretical level, and carry out research at the practical level to reveal the essence of the problem of sex education for left-behind children, find out the crux and prescribe the right remedy.

2. Survey design: respondents, methodology and contents

2.1 Respondents

Our survey was conducted among left-behind children in rural areas of southern Hunan Province. Located in central China and bordering with Guangdong, southern Hunan is

geographically dominated by mountainous areas and backward in education and economy. The coastal areas of Guangdong Province, which are economically developed and geographically adjacent to southern Hunan, are the destination of many migrant workers from southern Hunan Province. For this reason, left-behind phenomenon is widespread in southern Hunan, and left-behind children in rural areas of southern Hunan constitute representative samples for our survey over this topic.

2.2 Methodology

Our survey was a combination of questionnaire survey and face-to-face interviews. Different questionnaires were compiled for teachers, general public, children, and parents. The questionnaire for students was designed to gain a preliminary knowledge about children's growth and development, sexual consciousness, status quo of sex education, and sexual attitude. The questionnaire for teachers was to assess teachers' mastery of sex knowledge, their attitudes toward sex education, and the status quo of sex education at school. Face-to-face interviews were conducted among different adult groups regarding their understanding of sex knowledge, their attitudes towards sex education, and ways to administer sex education. SPSSAU was used for questionnaire data analyses, which included descriptive statistics, comparison of means, t-test, and correlation analysis. The survey findings can be summarized as follows:

2.3 Contents of survey

This survey was conducted in light of the reality of sexual safety among China's left-behind children in rural areas at the present stage and the undergoing policy advocacy for protection against sexual assault. We first expound on such core concepts as sex education and sexual safety education and discuss the status quo and influence factors of sex education for children. Our findings provide theoretical support for children's sex education in China. With basic knowledge acquired by questionnaire survey and interviews regarding the status quo and needs of left-behind children in rural areas, we plan to initiate campaigns to spread sexuality knowledge among left-behind children through group activities. Our experience will be valuable for delivering sex education among children in rural areas.

3. Survey results and statistical analysis

3.1 Status quo of sex education for left-behind children in rural areas

a. Sexual physiology of left-behind children in rural areas

Sexual development is considered a hallmark of adolescence and implicates a variety of sex-related factors, including sexual psychology, sexual consciousness, and sexual behaviors. In this study, the status of sexual development in girls was assessed based on secondary sex characteristics, including menarche and other physical changes. According to our survey, girls whose menarche occurred at an age of 11 to 12 years old accounted for 9.93% and 23.57%, respectively. Those who begin sexual development in this age accounted for no small proportion.

But due to an absence of sex education, most girls felt the panic upon menarche. The respondents who turned to their mothers for help accounted for the largest proportion. According to many respondents, their mothers were not around when menarche occurred because they were left-behind children. This is a typical example of inadequate family sex education.

b. Mastery of sex knowledge of left-behind children in rural areas

Our survey showed that most left-behind children did not have a correct understanding of their private parts. Neither did they know anything about sexual behaviors. Without a clear knowledge about basic concepts about sex, these children can hardly protect themselves in the face of sexual assault if any of these things happen, because they are unaware that something bad has happened to them. There was also a shortage of knowledge about pregnancy and contraception. When asked about the reasons for women getting pregnant, only a few girls gave a correct answer. Most girls said that they did not know anything about “the impact of induced abortion on girls”. As for the knowledge about contraception, barely no one knew anything more than the very basics.

c. Analysis of the status quo of sexual safety in left-behind children in rural areas

Nothing is more important than to instill the sense of sexual self-defense in children as far as sex education is concerned. Once being assaulted sexually, children are very likely to suffer serious consequences, such as anger, anxiety, depression, fear and personality disorders. One question in the survey was concerned with the status quo of the consciousness of sexual self-defense. The question went like this: Can any other person, including your parents, touch your breasts or private part without your permission? Some children chose “They cannot do so in any circumstances.” Other girls said that their parents can, and there were also girls who said they were unclear about it. We can see that few children know how to react in the face of sexual assault. Another question was “Do you know how to protect yourself if sexual assault occurs?” More than 40% of the children surveyed were not sure whether they could protect themselves or not.

As for knowledge about sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS, most children said that they knew nothing about them or they only heard somebody mentioned it or felt these concepts quite obscure. As for how AIDS is transmitted, most children said they did not know. It is easy to see that if children do not know enough about sexual self-defense before they step into society, they are very likely to face sexual health hazards. Our survey has fully demonstrated the urgency and necessity of administering sex education for children.

d. General lack of common knowledge in law among left-behind children in rural areas

Our survey has indicated a widespread lack of common knowledge in law among the respondents. One question went like this: “Do you know that having sex with young girls aged below (?) constitutes a violation of law, whatever the cues used or regardless of whether the girls themselves consent to it or not?” The respondents gave various answers as to the minimum age of young girls considered legally competent to consent to sexual acts. Very few respondents chose the right answer, and some of them

might have just “guessed right”. Apparently, children in rural areas had a very low level of legal knowledge regarding sex.

3.2 Teachers' cognition about sex education for children

Most teachers surveyed (73.33%) mastered more sex knowledge than students due to their senior age and rich social experience. Only a few teachers said that they only knew a little about sex (24.44%) or nothing at all (2.22%). Teachers' mastery of sex knowledge also affected teachers' attitudes to sex education at school. We observed that 92.22% of the teachers surveyed believed that it is necessary to offer sex education at school, which is beneficial to the physical and psychological growth of students; 5.56% of the teachers believed that it is only of moderate importance to offer sex education at school; 2.22% of the teachers believed that sex education is not important at all. Besides, teachers' mastery of sex knowledge was related to the practice of teaching and discussion about sex-related topics with their students.

Table 1. Pearson's correlation-detailed format

| | | 4. Have you ever learned anything about sex? |
|---|-------------------------|--|
| 9. Have you ever communicated individually with left-behind students in your class about sex? | Correlation coefficient | 0.161 |
| | p-value | 0.13 |
| 7. Do you spare some time in your class to teach about sex? If yes, how many classes are held per week for sex education? | Correlation coefficient | 0.219 |
| | p-value | 0.038 |
| 12. What is your attitude when girls consult with you about sex? | Correlation coefficient | 0.279 |
| | p-value | 0.008 |

The intensity of correlation was measured using Pearson's correlation coefficient. Whether the teacher has known enough about sex and whether the teacher has communicated individually with girls about sex.

The intensity of correlation was measured using Pearson's correlation coefficient. The coefficient of correlation between whether the teacher has known enough about sex and whether the teacher has communicated individually with girls about sex was

0.161, which was close to 0. Besides, the p-value was 0.130, which was higher than 0.05, indicating no significant correlation between the two. The coefficient of correlation between whether the teacher knows enough about sex and the frequency of sex education classes per week was 0.219, and the significance level was set to 0.05. Therefore, the two variables had a significant positive correlation. The coefficient of correlation between whether the teacher knows enough about sex and the teacher’s attitudes towards students’ consultation about sex was 0.279, and the significance level was set to 0.01. Therefore, the two variables had a significant positive correlation.

As seen from above, teachers with a greater reserve knowledge about sex are more capable of helping students learn about sex and encouraging them to know more about their bodily development and the changes occurring to their appearance. More communication with students about sex can help prevent inferiority complex due to bodily development and raise their awareness of sexual assault and self-defense.

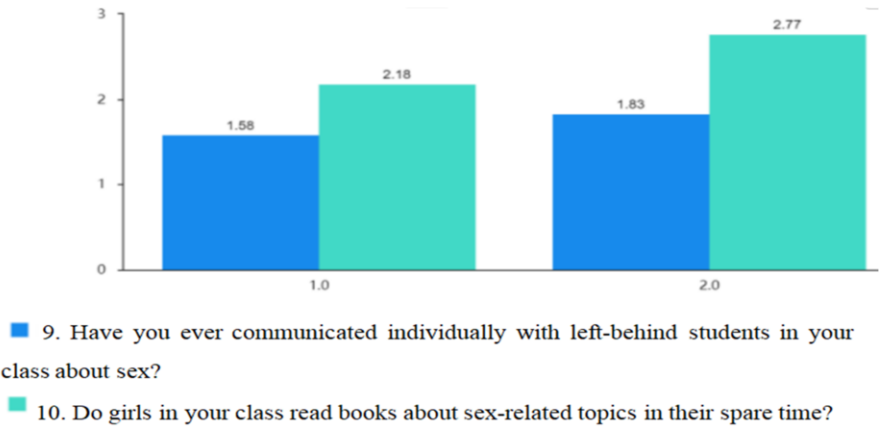


Figure 1 Teachers help students learn about sex

Generally, the number of left-behind children in each class varies. According to our survey, 61.11% of the teachers surveyed paid home visits to left-behind children to know about their family background and physical and mental conditions. Nevertheless, teachers still do not pay enough attention to sex education for left-behind children in rural areas. Only 32.22% of the teachers surveyed said that they had communicated individually with left-behind children about sex; 58.89% of the teachers did not know whether their students read books about sex-related topics in their spare time or not. But most teachers (65.56%) agreed that there was a general lack of sex knowledge among their students; 57.78% of the teachers surveyed would communicate with their students if they were consulted about sex and answer their doubts; 34.44% of the teachers would only provide simple answers to questions raised by students about sex; only 7.78% of the teachers said that they refused to answer any questions about sex. Teachers’ attitude towards sex also had an impact on students. If teachers refuse to talk about sex, the students may feel that sex is a bad thing. In that case, bodily development during adolescence may undesirably increase the likelihood of inferiority complex. When assaulted sexually, the children tend to keep their mouth shut or get threatened and suffer from long-term sexual assault. Teachers should provide positive guidance for students when being consulted about sex and make efforts to ensure their physical and mental health.

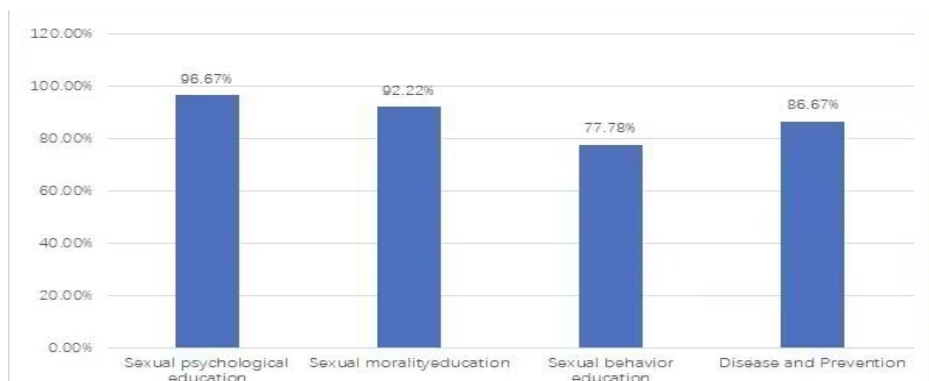


Figure 2. Teachers believed that sex education should be strengthened at school

Most teachers believed that the current sex education is far from comprehensive at school. According to their opinions, schools should strengthen education in sexual psychology, sexual morality, sexual behaviors, and sexually transmitted diseases and their prevention. Teaching activities of various kinds can be conducted at school. Teachers should also improve their sexual literacy to better help left-behind children in rural areas learn about sex.

3.3 A survey on public attitudes towards sex education for children

Table 2 Results of ANOVA

| Table 2. Results of ANCOVA | | | | | |
|--|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------|------------------|---|
| 8. Do you think that it is necessary for children to learn more about sex? (mean \pm standard deviation) | | | | F | p |
| Necessary (n=3) | | Unnecessary (n=297) | | Let it be (n=81) | |
| 7. Have you ever paid any attention to sex education for children? | 1.67 \pm 0.58 | 2.19 \pm 0.50 | 1.89 \pm 0.45 | 13.103 | 0 |

Analysis of variance is to compare differences of means in quantitative variable Y with respect to categorical variable X. As seen from the table above, one-way ANOVA was used to compare the difference in the answers given to the above two questions among adults. The public attitudes towards the necessity of sex education for children and whether the adults have paid any attention to sex education for children were significantly correlated with each other ($P < 0.05$). There seemed to be a consensus among the general public on the widespread absence of parents in sex education and the urgency of promoting sex education for children. Further analysis showed that the necessity of family sex education was significant at the 0.01 level ($F = 13.103$, $p = 0.000$). The mean score was compared between the groups, and the score for “Necessary” was higher than that for “Let it be” (see the figure below).

8.Do you think that it is necessary for children to learn more about sex?and7.Have you ever paid any attention to sex education for children?

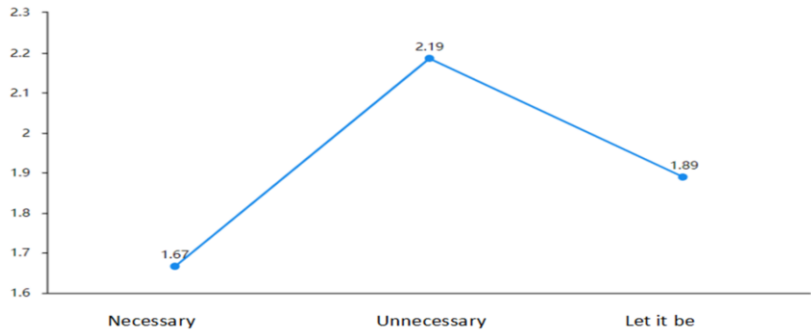


Figure 3 The public concern for sex education

Most adult respondents surveyed believed that children should learn more about sex. Very few respondents said that they did not consider it necessary. The above findings indicate that the public shows a growing concern for sex education for children.

Table 3. Results of t-test

| | 4. Have you ever learned anything about sex? (mean ± standard deviation) | | t | p |
|--|--|-----------|-------|---|
| | Yes (n=348) | No (n=33) | | |
| 5. Have your parents ever told you anything about sex? (please answer this question based on your personal identity) | 2.35±0.50 | 2.06±0.24 | 5.817 | 0 |

As shown from the table above, t-test (independent-samples t-test) was performed to determine whether children’s mastery of sex knowledge was significantly correlated to parents administering sex education to their children ($P<0.05$). We observed a significant correlation at the 0.01 level ($t=5.817$, $p=0.000$). It was also found that the average score of parents administering sex education to their children (2.35) was much higher than that of parents not administering sex education to their children (2.06).

The assumption made for analyzing the differences in answers to two questions, “Do you know anything about sex?” and “Have your parents taught you anything about sex?” using the t-test (independent samples t-test) was that children know about sex primarily from their parents. A P-value below 0.05 indicated that the two were significantly different. Long absence of parents means that the parents cannot teach their children about sex, which reduces the possibility of their children learning anything about sex. In China, the reality is that the long-term absence of parents is a widespread problem in rural areas, leading to a lack of sex education among left-behind children. This in turn has an adverse impact on children’s psychological and physical health. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss how to promote sex education in left-behind children in rural areas.

4. Have you ever learned anything about sex? and 5. Have your parents ever teach you anything about sex? (please answer this question based on your personal identity)

t-test

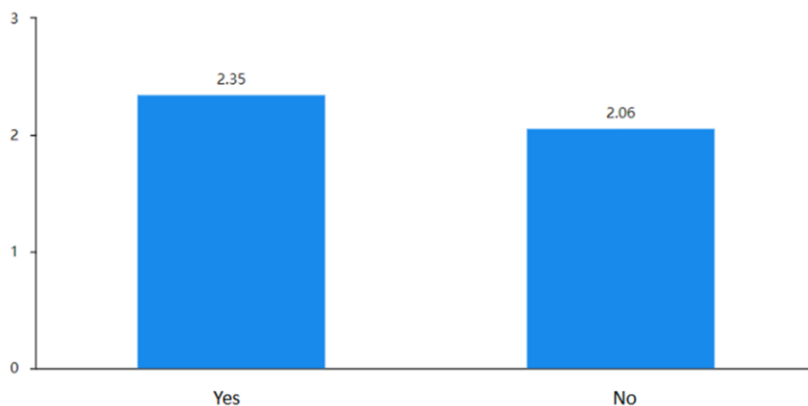


Figure 4 Children's learn about sexuality from their parents

4. Discussion

We arrive at the following conclusions based on our survey:

(1) Left-behind children in rural areas generally have limited sex knowledge. Without their parents by their sides, these children learn sex knowledge primarily from their peers or the Internet. We observe a lack of knowledge about sexual assault and how to prevent it among these children. They barely know anything about laws related to sexuality, which agrees with previous findings.

(2) Few schools provide sex education through specific curriculum. Teachers are more positive about sex education than before and consider it necessary for schools to provide sex education classes and launch other activities to teach sex knowledge.

(3) There is a serious lack of family sex education. Left-behind children do not live with their parents for an extended period of time, and they usually feel alienated from their parents. These children have little chance to learn about sexual health and care and how to protect themselves against sexual assault. Therefore, they are more vulnerable to physical and psychological hazards in relation to sex. The general public shows growing concern for sex education, which is a sign of social progress.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

We have identified several problems existing in sex education among left-behind children in rural areas through our survey. Such as children's lack of sex knowledge, school and family sex education is in the state of absence [5, 6]. This is consistent with previous research, indicating that sex education for rural children's has not made much progress. Scholars suggested that strengthen the sex education and the positive

publicity role of the media should be brought into play[9,10]. However, we found that most of teachers believed that sex education should be strengthened at school and hope to take various forms to carry out it .And the public 's attitude towards sex education is becoming more and more open and positive. This shows the development of society and the progress of thought. These changes will bring positive help to the development of sex education.

Children grow up healthily only in a healthy environment [11]. Education is interrelated and interpenetrated. We should not only start from individual problems, but also find out the problems of each system from the perspective of ecosystem and the social structure in which they are located[12].

It is necessary to pay attention to the integration and mobilization of various social resources, form a linkage mechanism of mutual coordination[13].The coordinated promotion by schools, families and society is an inevitable choice and an important measure to improve the effect of sex education. We should step up our efforts to strengthen sex education among left-behind children in rural areas. which include the following aspects:

a. The family should pay more attention to children's physical and psychological health. In the first place, parents should have correct sex knowledge and a keen awareness of sexual health themselves. They should attach due importance to children's physical and psychological health and provide sex education for their children.

b. The schools should provide sex education classes. They should assign specific teaching staff for sex education and provide sex education classes to spread sex knowledge and cultivate awareness of sexual health. It is necessary for schools to enrich and diversify the teaching materials and teaching method as far as sex education is concerned.

c. The government should accelerate the construction of policies and legal system regarding sexuality. Specifically, the government should release more policies and laws to fight sexual assault against left-behind children and supervise the implementation of relevant laws to improve the defense mechanism and safeguard the physical and psychological health of left-behind children.

d. Concerted efforts should be made to establish a sex education model involving multiple parties. Schools, families, government, and communities should work together to build a multi-dimensional system that promotes sex education and elevate awareness of self-protection against sexual assault among left-behind children in rural areas.

Acknowledgements

Thanks for the funds from 2021 Xiangnan University project: ([2021] No. 139, 2021XJ51). 2022 Chenzhou social science project (NoCZSSKL202205). 2022 Hunan Social Science project: Research on the Current Situation of Sexual Safety Education for Rural Left behind Girls and the Prevention Mechanism of sexual assault (22YBA234), 2022 the Innovation and Entrepreneurship Training Program for College Students in Hunan Province: Research and Practice on the Integration of Red Culture into Primary and Secondary School Education and Teaching under the Background of "Internet plus" (XJT [2022] No. 174: 4302).

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