

Education

# The Impact of Grandparenting on Rural Left-Behind Children in China

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**The increasing prevalence of grandparenting has drawn attention to the effects of this alternative childcare arrangement on children's growth. For Chinese migrant worker families, grandparents are the primary caregivers for the left-behind children. This article examines the factors that contribute to the dominance of grandparenting in these families, highlighting the challenges faced by rural left-behind children.**

**Keywords:** Grandparenting; Migrant Worker; Rural Left-Behind Children; China

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## Introduction

The growth and development of children are the cornerstones of cultural and social advancement. Home upbringing is the starting point of a child's education, and adult caretakers play a determining role in how the child develops (1). As the prevalence of grandparenting grows, there has been intensified research on its impact on the physical and mental growth of young children. Since the 1990s, the number of grandparents as childcare providers or custodians has substantially increased due to the inability of some younger parents to fulfill their family commitments for various reasons (2). As per Guzman, almost 50% of grandparents in the United States provided some type of childcare (3); Hank and Buber (2009) observed comparable figures in the findings from the 2004 Survey of Health, Aging, and Retirement in Europe (2). China's historical cultures, such as the kinship system based on blood ties, the agricultural production pattern based on the family as a unit, the large family

size-valued tradition, and the family-focused stereotype of female family members, firmly establish the role of grandparents in caring for grandchildren (4).

In the past few decades, China's reform and opening-up policy gave rise to its ongoing economic growth, which is largely based on the comparative advantage of its labor costs (5). A massive population of the labor force left their native places to seek better employment opportunities to raise their living standards. Yet, the majority of migrant workers from rural areas were unable to have their underage children live with them due to the erratic nature of their employment and the constraints regarding childcare, education, and living conditions. These children were left to the care of their relatives in homeplaces and dubbed "rural left-behind children." As per the report "What the 2020 Census Can Tell Us about Children in China: Facts and Figures" by the National Bureau of Statistics of China under the auspices of UNICEF and UNFPA, there were 66.93 million left-behind

children in China in 2020, 62.4% of whom were from rural areas, amounting to 41.77 million. This figure represented 37.9% of the total population of rural children in that year (6). The vast majority of rural, left-behind children are in the custody of their grandparents. This article focuses on analyzing the institutional, social, cultural, and familial factors contributing to the pervasiveness of grandparenting as a childcare arrangement for rural left-behind children in China and pinpointing its negative impacts on the growth environments, academic performance, and mental health of these children.

## **Underlying Causes of Grandparenting for Rural Left-Behind Children**

### **Institutional Factors**

There has been a longstanding bi-partite social and economic system in China, which classifies the whole population into two categories, urban and rural, based on individuals' "registered household residence" (Hukou). In China's established public education system, a child's Hukou determines their school admission at the basic education level. That means the child is entitled to free compulsory education provided by the state only when they are enrolled in the school coupled with their Hukou. Migrant workers from rural areas need to pay a considerable amount of extra tuition and fees if they choose to have their kids educated in urban schools. This expenditure is unaffordable for most financially strapped rural parents. To further complicate the issue, the current education system stipulates that the child must take the Hukou-related regional high-stakes examinations for school progression, and there are variations in the curriculum between schools in differential regions. Migrant worker parents often opt for local schools to train their children for their future examinations (7), thereby entrusting them to the care of grandparents residing in their home villages. Article 14 in the 1992 Compulsory Education Law of China demonstrates the rigidity of this policy, requiring school-age children and adolescents to obtain approval from the local county-level educational authorities to enroll in schools outside their Hukou's region (8).

In the meantime, the government's policy priorities have contributed to the prevalence of grandparenting among rural, left-behind children. As the population ages, the Chinese government has formulated a series of favorable welfare policies for the elderly, such as raising their annuity levels to afford them more economic power and improving their healthcare standards to ensure they can live a healthier later life (9). Policies like these significantly enhance older people's competence in engaging in the upbringing of the young generation (10). On the other hand, the government has paid insufficient attention to the pressures of childcare on the younger parents, who actually need more policy support, such as flexible working hours and extensions of maternity leaves. The job strain and fast pace of life make them more dependent on the involvement of the older generation in childcare (11).

### **Availability and Affordability of Organized Childcare Facilities**

In China, early childhood care and education services are less developed in areas with a sparse population and an inactive

economy. Rural areas in China lack a comprehensive public preschool education system. In looking for proper institutional childcare for their young kids, rural households often encounter issues regarding its availability, location, and quality. First, the limited number of nursery schools in villages cannot meet the growing needs of the rural population for early childhood care and education (12). At the same time, it is not simple to find a kindergarten within a reasonable distance for the younger child to travel. The most concerning is the quality of facilities and services at rural preschool institutions; younger parents feel extremely reluctant to entrust their kids to them (11). In this context, grandparenting stands out as a relatively reliable childcare arrangement in migrant worker families. Despite its limitations, it remains the optimal alternative in light of the scarcity of public preschool education resources in rural areas (13).

In addition, financial consideration is another factor in the adoption of grandparenting in migrant worker families. Migrant workers with unstable, low-status, and low-paid employment suffer much higher financial pressures than many other groups. High-quality childcare institutions or professional caretakers are considered "luxuries" for them, too costly to fit into their budget (14). From an economic standpoint, grandparenting is a rational option for this underprivileged group.

### **Ripples of Traditional Family Cultures**

Historically, there has been a strong tradition of multigenerational families among Chinese. People perceive a large family with many children and grandchildren as a sign of family prosperity and individual wellbeing (10). Despite the shift in family structure in modern times, the mentality of contributing to the extended family and descendants remains deep-seated among the older people. For the older generation, taking care of grandparents is not only fun but also a moral obligation. They see themselves as the preservers and protectors of their family, not just aging members. If they choose not to help their adult children in need, they will feel worthless and guilty. Furthermore, the neighborhood's potential negative opinions about neglecting intergenerational support duties may motivate grandparents to take on the responsibility of caring for their grandchildren, in order to safeguard their family's reputation (13). As a result, the traditional notions of intergenerational relationships serve as solid cultural underpinnings of grandparenting for rural children who are left behind. In addition, in a family-valued climate, the grandparents can easily develop close emotional ties with their grandchildren and serve as an emotional surrogate for the absent younger parents (15).

As a result of social and cultural evolution, the extended family has given way to the core family as the mainstream family structure. Nevertheless, this modern family pattern is not without its challenges. In the context of intensified employment competition and exacerbated work burdens, many younger parents have difficulty balancing work and family commitments. Grandparenting is coming back as an effective supplement to the functioning of core families, especially those with both parents working full-time (16). In the case of migrant worker families, the involvement of grandparents becomes the crucial upbringing arrangement for left-behind children.

## Challenges of Grandparenting for Rural Left-Behind Children in China

### Concerning Growth Environments under the Grandparenting Style

Grandparenting poses considerable safety and security risks to left-behind children in Chinese rural areas. First, the majority of rural grandparents in China are not full-time careers of their grandchildren; they have other duties to worry about, such as farm labor and household chores, which may occupy a large amount of their time and attention, increasing safety risks for the young kids. Second, their relatively lower educational levels lead to their inability to deliver effective safety education to their grandchildren, resulting in the latter's low sensitivity to safety hazards and lack of coping capacities for accidents. Third, those aged grandparents may have difficulty disciplining their adolescent grandchildren, making them susceptible to the adverse influence of delinquent peers (17).

In addition, most rural grandparents cannot provide adequate life quality to their left-behind grandchildren, particularly regarding food nutrition. Food hygiene, a balanced diet, and legitimate eating habits are all important for the physical and mental health of young children. In recent decades, widely recognized is the notion of "you are what you eat," which is particularly true in children at a critical stage of growth. According to UNESCO, a child's physical and mental development can stagnate due to inadequate intake of protein and calories. This damage is irreversible, regardless of the amount of nutritious food the child consumes as an adult. If such damage is widespread in a nation, it can negatively impact the nation's future development in all aspects (18). Rural grandparents, due to their life background marked by resource scarcity and a dearth of nutrition knowledge, typically have no regard for the importance of scientific diets for their young generation. During busy farming seasons or days with heavy workloads, rural grandparents often send their grandchildren to school without eating breakfast. Such behavior is extremely detrimental to the latter's healthy growth (19).

### Risks of Academic Failure in Rural Left-Behind Children in the Custody of Grandparents

Grandparenting increases the risk of academic failure in left-behind children for the following reasons: First, the permissive upbringing style of rural grandparents has negative impacts on the development of self-discipline in their grandchildren (20). Living with grandparents who lack educational responsibility deprives the young children of the essential experience of authoritative strictness. Well-developed self-discipline is not only the precondition for children's academic success but also for their future career advancements. Second, grandparents with outmoded education notions are not helpful in cultivating positive learning habits in young children. The rural grandparent,

with a low average educational level, is less likely to provide their grandchildren with effective supervision and guidance necessary for their development of self-regulation and self-management in learning (21). Third, grandparenting has negative effects on the confidence of rural, left-behind children in academic success. Learning weariness is common among this group. According to Zhou et al.'s study, the majority of rural left-behind children in the custody of their grandparents have strong senses of inferiority and seldom interact with the teacher and classmates voluntarily, exhibiting an inordinately low interest in learning (22).

### Mental and Psychological Issues among Rural Left-Behind Children in the Care of Grandparents

Research has shown that rural left-behind children cared for by grandparents have higher levels of insecurity, unsociability, and rebelliousness than their non-left-behind counterparts. First off, this group cannot perceive sufficient security in the absence of their parents, whereas their grandparents are experiencing physical and cognitive decline. They are more prone to anxiety and depression, exhibiting less resilience when encountering challenges and setbacks (23). Their senses of insecurity make them overly sensitive and alert to stimuli from the environment. Most of them are uninterested in or even hostile to collective activities. They often appear timid and unassertive when interacting with peers, leading to easy marginalization. Over time, they become increasingly unsociable and reluctant to engage in interpersonal communication (24).

On the other hand, some rural children who are left behind exhibit extremely rebellious behavior and a defiant mentality that is inconsistent with their age. One of the main reasons for this problem is the generation gap between this group and their grandparents, their day-to-day life caregivers. Communication problems between the two generations could be considerable, partly due to the latter's low readiness for understanding and accepting new stuff in the ever-changing world. The frustration of not being able to identify with their closest adult family members (in the absence of their own parents) gradually develops into a strong aversion to all forms of adult authority (24).

### Conclusion

Grandparenting in migrant worker families is the result of multiple factors, including institutional, social, cultural, and familial ones. Despite its legitimacy as a form of childcare support, its disadvantages outweigh the advantages for rural, left-behind children. It is imperative for the government to formulate more powerful policies to improve migrant workers' living conditions and give them the opportunity to have their children cared for and educated in the places where they work. The healthy growth of this special group is not only a familial matter, but it also concerns social harmony and justice. ■

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