

The Impact of Free-Range Parenting on Children's Mental Health in China

Bohan Yan*

Department of Education, University of Southampton, Southampton, Hampshire, SO17 1BJ, United Kingdom

*by4g22@soton.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Free-range parenting currently has a limited audience in China, where reducing parental control and involvement in children's growth is often perceived as a non-traditional and irrational choice by most parents. This paper analyzes Western theories, influences, and case studies within the context of China, conducting a comprehensive analysis to develop practical strategies for free-range education, particularly focusing on its main concepts. Compared to theoretical research, this study places greater emphasis on the psychological changes and emotional responses of children within this educational framework, especially the extent of positive impacts on their various abilities. Open parenting positively promotes children's psychological resilience and autonomy but should be implemented with certain optimization mechanisms. The research employs a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses to achieve theoretical insights while enhancing the practical design of free-range education under controlled and corrective mechanisms. The findings can effectively inform educational model selection and optimization strategies, including the design of control mechanisms and diversified models integrating multiple educational philosophies.

KEYWORDS

Free-Range Parenting; Autonomy; Parental Control; Psychological Impacts; Social Skills; Emotional Control.

1. INTRODUCTION

Free-range parenting is more widely accepted in the West, aligning with prevalent Western values and social forms, than in China. This approach emphasizes independence and freedom, resulting in minimal parental intervention [1,2]. Extensive Western research indicates that free-range parenting can enhance children's independence and critical thinking [3]. However, its acceptance in China remains relatively low. Due to significant differences in educational concepts between the East and West, as well as the underlying social philosophies, this article aims to explore the applicability of free-range education in China and how to optimize and ensure its implementation.

The goals of free-range education are somewhat contrary to the educational objectives of domestic families, as the former focuses on the growth of internal comprehensive factors in individuals, expecting to foster children with greater problem-solving abilities and stronger self-awareness. In contrast, domestic educational goals primarily emphasize academic achievement, leading to a model that often requires children to adhere more strictly to discipline and exhibit greater self-restraint. While the number and scale of families adopting free-range education abroad have increased to the

point of becoming a social phenomenon, awareness and acceptance of this educational model remain low in China.

In "The Danish Way of Parenting," Jessica and others discuss the Danish parenting style, which aligns closely with free-range education, leaning towards autonomous decision-making and self-regulation in children's behavioral patterns [1]. With the progress of the times, children in China will face more external challenges beyond academics in the future, making research on free-range education increasingly significant. Free-range education offers unique advantages concerning individuals' resilience to external factors, problem-solving abilities, and skills such as autonomy, communication, decision-making, and emotional management. Using both qualitative interviews and quantitative questionnaires, this study investigates how this parenting approach affects Chinese children's social skills, self-ability, and emotional control. It seeks to close a significant gap in the current body of information regarding the cross-cultural applicability of free-range parenting and offer empirical support for parenting and educational strategies that are tailored to the unique cultural circumstances of China.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Lenore Skenazy first suggested that helicopter parenting and overprotective parenting techniques should be replaced with encouraging children to learn on their own to explore unknown possibilities and emphasizing minimizing parental supervision to promote children's overall development in her book "Free-Range Kids, How to Raise Safe, Self-Reliant Children (Without Going Nuts with Worry)"[4]. This fundamental idea is predicated on the idea that kids are somewhat creative and capable of making their own decisions. Peter Gray notes in "Free to Learn" that children can better learn how to control their own behavior and emotions in an unstructured setting, underscoring the significance of free play in fostering children's creativity and social skills [5].

Academic achievement has emerged as a crucial determinant of a child's success in Chinese families. As a holdover from the imperial examination system that was used to choose officials centuries ago, traditional Chinese education places a strong emphasis on academic achievement and tests to demonstrate one's abilities. Even with the current shift in educational approaches, performance in school is still measured by tests and grades. Domestic parents generally believe that academic performance directly determines a series of future developments, including their careers. As a result, parents tend to have higher expectations for their children compared to those abroad, especially concerning improvements in grades and subject knowledge. They invest significant financial and time resources into their children's education [6].

Children do improve their academic performance under this educational approach, but it also has certain negative effects. For example, Shek noted in his research that academic pressure and the pursuit of high grades can lead to mental health issues in children and adolescents, potentially resulting in anxiety and depression [7]. As Amy Chua points out in "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother" the strict demands for learning and the excessive emphasis on grades can lead to a series of psychological health problems, which also includes parents' strict supervision of their children [8].

The emphasis that Chinese families place on academics significantly differs from Western educational philosophies that advocate for optimism, freedom, and problem-solving abilities, both internal and external. Most countries in the United States and Europe tend to adopt more liberal and open educational approaches. In this model, Western families also establish more relaxed and straightforward communication patterns, enhancing their children's communication and expression skills. This helps parents understand their children's emotions and the challenges they face, providing suggestions and solutions during conversations. This supportive educational model not only fosters autonomy, but it also makes free-range education a form that is not entirely without oversight [3]. In this context, most practical examples and research findings indicate that children do not experience

excessive developmental issues due to free-range parenting. On the contrary, it provides a foundation for developing various skills, including emotional control, communication abilities, and self-regulation.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study primarily utilizes a quantitative research method through questionnaire surveys, combined with qualitative research methods such as interviews and observations, to explore the various positive changes and negative impacts experienced by children in a free-range education model. The questionnaires and interviews were conducted through both on-site and online channels, using internet platforms and social media for in-depth information collection and organization. Understanding the development of free-range education requires a multifaceted approach involving various roles [9].

The observation method primarily assesses how free-range parenting is reflected in educational outcomes and the changes experienced by children in this educational environment [4].

This article collects and analyzes information to summarize important related insights obtained during interviews. Interviews represent an effective investigative process that combines subjective descriptions and communication with objective events and experiences. The investigation comprehensively considers the timeliness and periodicity of the information while ensuring its universality and rationality. The information gathered holds significant research value and provides a comprehensive reflection of the existing issues [10].

In terms of the questionnaires, detailed question design was combined with reliability analysis to ensure the validity of the data conclusions. This approach guaranteed that the information collected effectively supported the research content. Factor analysis was employed to link practical aspects, completing the statistical and analytical processes to form a system of influencing factors for free-range education. The focus was on understanding children's mindset changes and mental health levels under this educational approach, as well as the emergence and development of unique qualities.

4. THE INFLUENCE OF FREE-RANGE PARENTING ON CHILDREN'S SELF-PERCEPTION

The questionnaire survey results indicate that roughly 70% of parents frequently give their kids free reign to choose everyday activities, which is consistent with the sample population's preference for free-range parenting. Approximately 65% of parents either help their kids solve difficulties or let them do so on their own, indicating that these parents are more receptive to the idea of free-range schooling. Only 16% of youngsters have low self-esteem, 46% have moderate self-esteem, and 38% have high self-esteem, according to studies on self-esteem. These results lend credence to the idea that letting kids form their own opinions fosters self-assurance and sound judgment. Children's self-esteem typically rises dramatically when they feel that they have control over their own behavior. When faced with problems, about 40% of kids feel confident most of the time, 35% of kids feel confident occasionally, and 25% of kids feel confident infrequently. Fostering critical thinking and independent judgment in youngsters without explicit parental direction not only enhances their self-worth but also equips them to tackle obstacles down the road [5,11].

Free-range parenting does not imply complete non-involvement; rather, it grants children greater autonomy in decision-making and choices [12]. At the same time, it is essential to establish effective communication mechanisms to ensure smooth communication and information flow throughout the process, facilitating children's autonomous growth. Parents should make sure their kids understand that they may always ask for assistance when they are in emotionally stressful situations that they are unable to handle. The effectiveness of free-range parenting depends on supportive communication,

which is crucial in reducing any potential feelings of isolation and worry [12]. These research conclusions effectively reflect the characteristics of this educational method, as well as its main impacts and functions. They can significantly promote the theoretical research on educational methods and provide valuable references for the education of children in some families.

5. THE INFLUENCE OF FREE-RANGE PARENTING ON CHILDREN' EMOTIONAL CONTROL

Free-range education fosters stronger emotional control abilities. The environment of solitude and autonomous decision-making allows children to understand and manage their emotions better, which making them emotional stability greater. This ensures that children's perception of their emotions is rational and accurate, making it harder for external influences to have a negative impact on them. As a result, these children tend to have stable emotions and a clear understanding of their needs, exhibiting both stability and a positive disposition. This parenting model relies on appropriate communication and guidance from parents; without it, emotional mismanagement and incorrect perceptions of information can occur. For instance, when facing difficulties, children may temporarily lack the ability to cope, leading to emotions that can cause tension and anxiety, subsequently diminishing their emotional control [12]. Additionally, fear of challenges and the unknown may cause children to become timid and withdrawn in the absence of external support. This can result in feelings of emotional isolation. One respondent said, "I remember being torn as a child between emotional solitude and monetary happiness. I felt really alone and powerless because I thought that even though my parents loved me, they wouldn't come with me."

Thus, in the context of free-range parenting, parents' ought to make sure their kids understand that they can always come to them for support if their emotional issues get out of control. The key to preventing potential unease and loneliness in children and guaranteeing the success of free-range parenting is prompt intervention and encouraging contact from parents. In addition to fostering independence in children, this well-rounded approach protects their emotional well-being, which is essential for achieving the objectives of free-range parenting.

6. THE INFLUENCE OF FREE-RANGE PARENTING ON CHILDREN' SOCIAL SKILLS

According to survey and interview data, kids who experience free-range parenting are typically more adaptive and socially autonomous than their classmates who experience more monitored parenting. For instance, many kids who grow up in free-range settings are able to form relationships with people without needing their parents' direct supervision, which shows that they have more initiative and self-assurance when it comes to social interactions [1]. These kids learn how to adjust to new situations through unstructured, unsupervised social interactions. By autonomously handling social situations and settling disputes with others, they forge strong social coping strategies that are crucial to their long-term social development [1].

Interacting with peers in various social environments can broaden children's understanding of different social norms and behaviors, thereby enhancing their adaptability and empathy [2]. Nonetheless, this parenting style also presents difficulties. Premature freedom may lead some children, who are objectively unprepared, to make inappropriate choices driven by subjective self-awareness. In certain situations, the responses and feedback to these choices may cause children to avoid social interactions and communication due to negative evaluations [12]. Although growing up in a free-range environment can greatly promote children's social freedom and flexibility, it requires a certain degree of control and adjustment mechanisms to ensure children acquire the skills necessary to navigate social situations. In order to help their children negotiate challenging social settings,

parents should be aware of each child's unique needs for social development and be ready to help when needed [1].

7. DISCUSSION

7.1. Regional Variations in Parenting Impacts

Regional variations in child development outcomes and parenting methods were shown to differ significantly between urban and rural settings. The reason for these variations is the educational attainment of the parents. The information indicates that urban parents with higher levels of education have a tendency to embrace more sophisticated and scientific parenting ideas, to scientifically encourage their kids' independence and autonomy, and to help them realize their full potential in every way. Less educated parents might not provide their kids' wants and feelings enough of attention. Children are readily disturbed and influenced by outside stimuli, even if their parents follow the same free-range parenting approach. This can have long-term implications on the children's mental health and social skills. This distinction highlights an important point: children's self-control and self-discipline are especially crucial, even in a free-range parenting setting.

7.2. Socioeconomic Influences on Parenting Styles

When considering the implementation of free-range education, it is crucial to take into account the influence of environmental factors. Each family's environment and circumstances are entirely different; a one-size-fits-all approach is inappropriate. It is essential to integrate both internal and external environmental factors to determine the most suitable educational methods, ensuring that children receive the best opportunities for growth.

7.3. Case Study Insights

This study interviewed a student to understand the positive and negative impacts she experienced in the absence of parental companionship and control. Due to her parents' busy work schedule, this student spent a significant amount of time alone at home, which also meant that many decisions had to be made independently. As a result, she became more adept at addressing certain issues and taking responsibility for herself. The student mentioned that although her childhood experiences often involved feelings of loneliness, it was also these experiences that enabled her to self-motivate and manage her emotions at any time. Moreover, parents place significant emphasis on emotional communication within the family and do not overlook the loneliness and helplessness their child may experience. They frequently offer advice and summaries, which contributes to a more positive and optimistic emotional state for the child. This experience provides a perspective that free-range education does not solely rely on environmental factors but requires targeted support measures and appropriate guidance. Furthermore, this educational model does not necessarily affect children's feelings of loneliness; rather, it may promote greater independence, reliability, and a more positive attitude towards communication.

This case not only reflects a specific process and outcome of free-range education but also indicates that parental involvement is still necessary in certain aspects, such as providing advice, communication, and emotional support. Additionally, it allows for a better understanding of how to develop educational models in different environments and optimize them accordingly.

7.4. Cultural Differences and Adaptation

This study found that free-range parenting significantly outperforms traditional parenting methods in fostering children's autonomy and self-efficacy. However, the effectiveness of this parenting style varies greatly across cultural groups, particularly in terms of social adaptation and emotional control.

Additionally, Chinese parents and educators are less receptive to free-range parenting methods compared to their Western counterparts, partly due to the high emphasis on academic achievement. This cultural difference has a significant impact on kids' social and psychological development, which runs counter to research by Gray and Skenazy that highlighted the benefits of free-range parenting for helping kids in the West develop their autonomy and problem-solving abilities [1, 2].

7.5. Policy Implications and Future Research

Education policymakers must consider cultural values in family education and raise public awareness and acceptance of the advantages of free-range parenting through educational seminars and public media education in order to more successfully promote free-range parenting in China and overcome cultural barriers. It is advised that educators and legislators create parental support programs that are tailored to the cultural backgrounds of different parents in light of the study's findings, particularly with regard to offering emotional and behavioral regulatory help. To optimize the advantages of free-range parenting in various cultural contexts, future studies should investigate how to modify these techniques in light of China's unique family and sociocultural traits.

8. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how free-range education impacts the mental health of Chinese children through quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. The research findings indicate that free-range parenting can significantly enhance children's autonomy and self-efficacy, improving their social skills and self-awareness, results in children who are better at managing emotions and more resilient when facing challenges. As they gradually adapt to situations without continuous parental supervision, they develop excellent self-regulation skills in handling daily tasks and social situations. This increases their confidence and improves their ability to adapt to diverse environments. Moreover, the study emphasizes the importance of considering children's individual characteristics in practice. Providing autonomy in moderation can reduce the likelihood of anxiety and loneliness. Therefore, parents need to recognize when their children are ready for independence and offer support and guidance when necessary.

Parental expectations and traditional educational thought within the Chinese cultural environment differ significantly from those in the Western countries. In situations where parental involvement is high and academic success is widely and exclusively recognized at the social level, it is feasible and effective to adopt or transition to a more permissive parenting style, aiming to balance cultural expectations against the benefits of giving children more autonomy. However, while promoting independence and resilience is beneficial for children's development, the use of such parenting methods must be cautious, targeted, and differentiated, fully taking into account individual needs and appropriately merging with cultural context. Future research should continue exploring how to adjust the nuances of permissive parenting in different cultural environments to maximize benefits and minimize potential drawbacks. This study provides educators and parents with ideas and references to formulate diverse teaching strategies and parenting methods to balance personalized growth needs and social development among children globally.

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