

The Relationship between Parents' Socioeconomic Status and Children's Social Development: The Mediating Role of Family Rearing Styles

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Abstract

This study explored the relationships between parental socioeconomic status (SES), parenting styles, and children's social development, focusing on parenting styles' mediating role. A questionnaire survey was conducted with 410 primary school students (Grades 3-6) in Shenzhen and their families, using a parental SES composite index, the Short-form Egna Minnen av Barndoms Uppfostran (S-EMBU-C), and the Children's Social Development Scale. Results showed: (1) Parental SES and positive parenting styles were significantly positively correlated with children's social development, while negative parenting styles were significantly negatively correlated; (2) Parental SES directly positively predicted children's social development and indirectly influenced it via parenting styles; (3) Parenting styles played a partial mediating role, with fathers' positive parenting and mothers' negative parenting showing particularly significant mediating effects. This study clarifies the mechanism of parenting styles and provides empirical support for improving children's social development via parenting interventions.

Keywords

Socioeconomic Status; Parenting Style; Mediating Effect; Children's Social Development.

1. Introduction

Children's social development refers to socially significant psychological traits formed during socialization, affecting academic performance, mental health, and lifelong development [1, 2]. Early deficits in these traits are hard to reverse in adulthood [3].

Family environment is pivotal to children's social development, with parental SES as a key indicator of family resources [4, 5]. High-SES families provide abundant educational and living resources to facilitate development, while low-SES families face financial pressures that hinder it [6].

However, the mechanism linking parental SES to children's social development remains understudied. The family stress model suggests low SES increases parental stress, which harms children's mental health—with parenting styles potentially mediating this process [7]. Democratic parenting promotes development, while controlling styles hinder it [8].

Existing studies have examined pairwise relationships between SES, parenting styles, and social development, but few explore parenting styles' mediating role. This study fills this gap via a questionnaire survey.

2. Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

2.1. Parental Socioeconomic Status (SES)

SES is multidimensional, determining material resources (housing, tutoring) and cultural/social capital [9, 10]. It influences children's social development via: (1) direct educational investment [11]; (2) parental mental health [12]; (3) parent-child interactions [13]. H1: Parental SES significantly predicts children's social development.

2.2. Children's Social Development

Children's social development involves learning social norms to adapt to life, encompassing social cognition, emotion, behavior, and adaptation [14]. This study's self-compiled scale measures 15 dimensions via parental reports.

2.3. Family Parenting Styles

Parenting styles are stable child-rearing patterns [15]. Based on S-EMBU-C, this study divides them into: Positive and Negative. High-SES parents tend to use democratic styles, while low-SES parents show inconsistent/harsh behaviors [16]. Positive styles promote social competence, while negative styles increase anxiety/aggression [17].

H2: Parental SES positively predicts positive parenting styles and negatively predicts negative styles.

H3: Positive parenting styles positively predict children's social development; negative styles negatively predict it.

2.4. Mediating Role of Parenting Styles

Family stress and ecosystem theories suggest SES affects development via proximal processes like parenting [18]. High-SES parents use positive styles to foster development, while low-SES stress leads to negative styles [19].

H4: Parenting styles mediate the relationship between parental SES and children's social development.

The conceptual model of this study is shown in Figure 1.

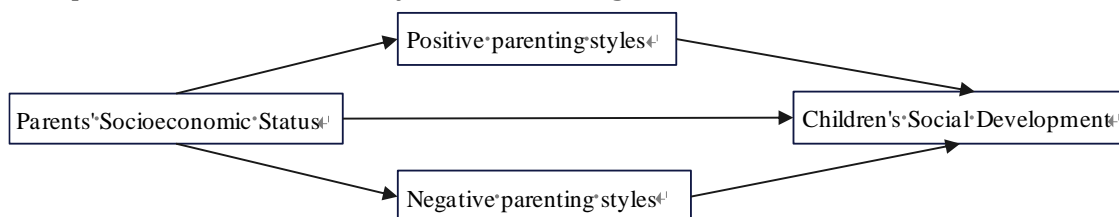


Figure 1. Theoretical Model Diagram

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research Object

This study employed convenience sampling to select students from grades 3-6 and their parents at a public elementary school in Shenzhen as research subjects. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed, with 410 valid responses collected after excluding invalid ones with repetitive answers or excessive missing data, achieving an 82.000% response rate. The basic sample characteristics are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants (N=410)

variable	class	frequency	percentage (%)
grade	Grade 3	128	31.22
	Grade 4	106	25.85
	Grade 5	96	23.41
	Grade 6	80	19.51
Gender of child	man	218	53.17
	woman	192	46.83

3.2. Research Tools

3.2.1. Questionnaire on the Assessment of Parents' Socioeconomic Status

The comprehensive index method measured parental socioeconomic status (SES). Based on occupational classification, parents' occupations were classified into upper-level, middle-level, and lower-level [20]. The higher occupational grade of parents was used as the family's occupational tier. Educational attainment was divided into six levels, and the higher qualification was retained. Household economic status was subjectively assessed at three tiers: "difficult", "moderate", and "affluent". After standardizing occupation, education, and income indicators, principal component analysis found a composite factor (loadings: occupation 0.892, education 0.901, income 0.756) reflecting family SES. Higher factor scores mean greater household socioeconomic standing.

3.2.2. Parenting Style Scale (S-EMBU-C)

This study used the Chinese version of the Simplified Parenting Style Scale (S - EMBU - C) revised by Jiang et al. The scale has 42 items, divided into a father and a mother version with 21 items each, and assesses three dimensions: emotional warmth, rejection, and overprotection. Based on theory, the emotional warmth dimension forms a positive parenting style (7 items in both versions), and rejection and overprotection form a negative parenting style (14 items in both versions). It uses a 4 - point rating system (1 = never, 4 = always). The Cronbach's α coefficients for father's positive, father's negative, mother's positive, and mother's negative parenting styles were 0.795, 0.843, 0.789, and 0.851 respectively, showing good reliability.

3.2.3. Children's Social Development Scale

The study employed a self-compiled "Children's Social Development Scale", which parents assessed based on their child's daily behaviors. The scale comprises 60 items across 15 dimensions: social rule compliance, social cognition, willpower, lifestyle habits, extraversion/introversion, family attachment, emotional stability, self-concept, peer relationships, non-aggression, independence, honesty and fairness, empathy and helpfulness, competitiveness, and self-esteem. Each dimension contains 4 items, with a 5-point scale (1= completely inconsistent, 5= completely consistent) yielding a total score ranging from 60 to 300 points. Higher scores indicate better social development. The scale demonstrated excellent reliability, with an overall Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.968 and α coefficients for individual dimensions ranging from 0.702 to 0.891.

3.2.4. Research Procedures and Data Processing

The study underwent ethical review. After getting informed consent from the school and students' parents, it conducted group testing by class. Trained examiners read out instructions, and parents completed questionnaires on - site which were then immediately collected. All data were entered, organized, and analyzed using SPSS 26.0 for correlation and regression analysis. The PROCESS macro (version 4.3, Model 4) by Hayes was used to test mediation effects. 5,000 bootstrap samples were used to calculate the confidence interval (CI) for indirect effects. A significant mediation effect was indicated when the 95% CI did not include zero.

4. Research Results

4.1. Common Method Bias Test

Since all data were derived from parental reports, a Harman single-factor test was employed to examine common method bias. The results revealed 18 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. Notably, the first factor explained 28.734% of the total variance, which falls below the 40% threshold. This indicates that the study does not exhibit significant common method bias.

4.2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlation coefficients of all research variables. Parental socioeconomic status significantly and positively correlated with children's total social development score ($r=0.412$, $p<0.001$), and also with both paternal ($r=0.385$, $p<0.001$) and maternal ($r=0.361$, $p<0.001$) positive parenting styles. In contrast, it had significant negative correlations with paternal ($r=-0.294$, $p<0.001$) and maternal ($r=-0.277$, $p<0.001$) negative parenting styles. Children's social development significantly and positively correlated with paternal ($r=0.523$, $p<0.001$) and maternal ($r=0.498$, $p<0.001$) positive parenting styles, while significantly and negatively correlating with paternal ($r=-0.401$, $p<0.001$) and maternal ($r=-0.432$, $p<0.001$) negative parenting styles. These findings lay a solid foundation for subsequent mediation effect analysis.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix of variables in Table 2 (N=410)

variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	1					
2	0.385***	1				
3	-0.294***	-0.487***	1			
4	0.361***	0.712***	-0.421***	1		
5	-0.277***	-0.405***	0.685***	-0.463***	1	
6	0.412***	0.523***	-0.401***	0.498***	-0.432***	1

Note: 1. Parental SES, 2. Father's positive parenting style, 3. Father's passive parenting style, 4. Mother's active parenting style, 5. Mother's negative parenting style, 6. Social development of children; $p<0.05^*$, $p<0.01^{**}$, $p<0.001^{***}$.

4.3. Mediating Effect Test

This study used Model 4 of Process macroprogram. After controlling for children's gender and grade, we tested the mediating role of family parenting style between parents' SES and children's social development, using father's positive and negative parenting styles and mother's positive and negative parenting styles as mediating variables respectively.

4.3.1. The Mediating Effect of Paternal Active Parenting Style

Regression analysis shows parental SES significantly predicts paternal positive parenting style and children's social development. When both were considered, paternal positive parenting style significantly predicted children's social development. Bootstrap tests showed a non-zero mediating effect value of 4.624 (95%CI: [3.125, 6.458]), accounting for 23.701% of the total effect.

4.3.2. The Mediating Effect of Paternal Passive Parenting Style

Parental SES significantly predicts negative paternal parenting style. When both were considered, paternal negative parenting style had a significant negative effect on children's social development. Bootstrap analysis confirmed a significant mediation effect (95%CI: [1.895, 4.782], $p < 0.05$), accounting for 16.265% of the total effect.

4.3.3. The Mediating Effect of the Mother's Parenting Style

Parental SES significantly and positively predicts maternal positive parenting style. When both were considered, maternal positive parenting style significantly and positively predicted children's social development. Bootstrap tests confirmed a significant mediation effect of 3.996 (95%CI: [2.587, 5.652]), accounting for 20.481% of the total effect.

4.3.4. The Mediating Effect of Maternal Passive Parenting Style

Parental SES had a significant negative correlation with maternal negative parenting style. When both were considered, maternal negative parenting style had a significant negative effect on children's social development. The bootstrap test confirmed a significant mediating effect of 3.790 (95%CI: [2.341, 5.521]), accounting for 19.426% of the total effect.

Table 3. Bootstrap Analysis of Mediation Effect in Family Parenting Styles

The path	Effect value	Boot standard error	Boot CI Lower Limit	Boot CI upper limit	Relative mediation effect
Total indirect effect	15.583	1.892	12.125	19.452	0.79887
Indirect pathway 1: SES→FPos→CSD	4.624	0.845	3.125	6.458	0.23701
Indirect Path 2: SES→FNeg→CSD	3.173	0.732	1.895	4.782	0.16265
Indirect Path 3: SES→MPos→CSD	3.996	0.781	2.587	5.652	0.20481
Indirect pathway 4: SES→MNeg→CSD	3.79	0.809	2.341	5.521	0.19426
Direct effect: SES→CSD	3.92	1.023	1.892	5.874	0.20092

Note: FPos denotes the father's positive parenting style; FNeg indicates the father's negative parenting style; MPos represents the mother's positive parenting style; MNeg indicates the mother's negative parenting style; CSD stands for children's social development.

The overall effect of parental socioeconomic status (SES) on children's social development was 19.503. The direct effect accounted for 3.920, representing 20.092% of the total effect, while the total indirect effect mediated by parenting style contributed 15.583, constituting 79.887% of the total effect. This indicates that parenting style plays a significant mediating role between parental SES and children's social development, with partial mediation. All hypotheses (H1 to H4) were supported by the research findings.

5. Discussion

5.1. The Relationship between Parents' Socioeconomic Status and Children's Social Development

Consistent with prior studies, parental SES positively correlates with children's social development. High-SES families provide material/educational resources and emotional support, while low-SES families lack such resources [21]. This supports H1.

5.2. The Mediating Role of Family Upbringing Styles

Parenting styles partially mediate the SES-social development link (supporting H4). High-SES parents use positive styles (emotional warmth) due to less stress, while low-SES parents show negative styles (rejection) due to resource scarcity. The 79.887% total indirect effect highlights that improving parenting (even for low-SES families) can boost children's development.

5.3. Educational Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study, the following educational recommendations are proposed: Firstly, governments and schools should focus on children from low-SES families, offering additional educational support and social resources to compensate for home resource deficiencies. Measures like tuition reduction and extracurricular activity subsidies can create more development opportunities for them. Secondly, parent education programs should be implemented and strengthened. These programs help parents understand positive parenting styles and acquire skills for warm, supportive interactions with children. Special support, including parenting guidance and social services, should target low-SES parents to relieve economic and parenting pressures and reduce negative parenting practices. Finally, schools and communities should establish parent support groups or parent schools. These platforms can facilitate parenting experience exchange and provide professional guidance, promoting parenting competency and better supporting children's social development.

5.4. Research Limitations and Prospects

Limitations: Cross-sectional design (no causal inference), single-school sample (limited generalizability), focus only on parenting styles. Future research should use longitudinal/experimental designs, expand sampling, and explore other variables (parental mental health, child temperament).

6. Conclusion

This study, by investigating the relationships between parental socioeconomic status, family parenting styles, and children's social development, draws the following conclusions:

- (1) Parental SES, parenting styles (both parents' positive/negative), and children's social development are significantly correlated in expected directions.
- (2) Parental SES directly predicts children's social development and indirectly via both parents' positive/negative styles.
- (3) Parenting styles play a partial mediating role, with total indirect effects accounting for 79.887% of the total effect.

These findings clarify the role of parenting in the SES-social development link, providing guidance for family education interventions.

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