

## Effects of Family Functioning on Socioemotional Behaviour of Children in Low Income Family

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**Abstract:** This study examines the effects of family functioning on socioemotional behavior of children in low income family. Participants comprised of 518 parents of children aged four to six years old of low income family. Data were collected using structured questionnaires. Family functioning was measured using Malaysian Family Strengths Scale, while socioemotional behavior of children was measured using Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). The findings of the study revealed that high level of family functioning contributed to low level of socioemotional behavior problems of children. Mothers and fathers of low income family had similar perception in family functioning and children socioemotional behavior. This study highlights the importance of enhancing family functioning in order to reduce emotional problems, conduct problems and peer problems and also increasing prosocial behavior of children in low income family.

**Key words:** : *family functioning, socioemotional, behavior, children, low income family*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Low-income family in Malaysia refer to household that had income of less than RM3, 860 a month and also known as the B40 family [1]. Previous studies showed that family with low monthly income had low family functioning [2-4] and children with high socioemotional behaviour problems [5-8].

Family functioning usually has the characteristics of tendency towards stability and balance, the opportunity to adjust the situation, the existence of unity and the value of love and togetherness, and respect the differences of individuals which in turn create opportunities for individuals in the family to fulfill their role [9]. While socioemotional behaviour is a process that related to “changes in an individual’s personality, emotions relationship with other people and social contexts” [10].

Literature review showed that dysfunctional family related to high children’s socioemotional behavioral problems among low income family [11]. A study

conducted by Hardaway, Wilsona, Shawb, and Dishionc [12] that involving 731 primary caregiver–child dyads of low income family found that maintaining family routines and minimizing disorganization were more likely promotes children’s socioemotional functioning. The result of the study by Mistry et al. [11] and Hardaway et al. [12] were inconsistent with the study conducted by Zarinah and Cecelia [13]. Zarinah and Cecelia [13] found that there was no association between family functioning and children’s socioemotional behavior.

Previous studies have shown inconsistency results regarding the gender effect in perceived family functioning. Asmawati, Fatimah, Zainah, Nor Ba’yah and Mohd Norahim [14] found that there was no significant difference in perceived family functioning between father and mother. The study by Asmawati et al. [14] was conducted in three areas in Malaysia which are Alor Setar, Kota Bharu and Lembah Kelang. Pisula and Porębowicz-DoÈrsmann [15] also found no gender differences in the parental reports of family functioning

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in parents of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and parents of typically developing children. The results of the study by Delvecchio, Di Riso and Salcuni [16] also showed that Italian parents had a similar self-perception of family functioning and they share common cultural beliefs and values toward the family. Meanwhile, Tiffin, Pearce, Kaplan, Fundudis and Parker [17] have found that there was a significant association between gender and family functioning. Their study was conducted among American family.

## 2. Objective

In general the objective of the study is to determine the effects family functioning on socioemotional behaviour of children in low income family. While the specific objectives of the study as follow:

- 1) To describe the levels of perceived family functioning and socioemotional behaviour of children in low income family.
- 2) To determine the relationship between perceived family functioning and socioemotional behaviour of children in low income family.
- 3) To compare differences in perceived family functioning between mother and father of low income family.
- 4) To compare differences in perceived socioemotional behaviour of children between mother and father of low income family.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Participants and Procedure

This study is a cross-sectional study conducted in urban and rural areas in Kelantan, Kedah, Negeri Sembilan and Johor, Malaysia. The participants in the study were parents of children aged 4 to 6 years old who identified as low income family. The stratified random sampling was employed in the study based on location (urban and rural) and gender of the participants. Participants were selected based on the list name of children who have parents of low income family provided by teachers of selected preschool. The self-administered questionnaire was distributed to all the participants through their children in the selected preschool

### 3.2 Measures

#### 3.2.1 Family Functioning

Family functioning was measured using Malaysian

Family Strengths Scale (MFSS) developed by Arshat, Baharudin, Juhari, Hasbullah, and Ishak [18]. This scale consist of 27 items to assess seven dimensions of family functioning: 1) Communication (3 items); 2) Love (5 items); 3) Support (4 items); 4) Commitment (4 items); 5) Acceptance (4 items); 6) Religiosity (4 items); 7) Relationship (3 items). The scale responses range from 1= definitely disagree to 6= definitely agree. Some of the items included were "Our family members listen each other." and "Our family members support each other". The total of family strength score was obtained by adding the scores for all the items where higher score indicate higher family strength. For this study reliability for MFSS was .97.

#### 3.2.1 Socioemotional Adjustment

The 25 item Malay version of Goodman's Strengths and Difficulties [19] was used to measure 5 types of socioemotional behaviour among children of four to six years old. 5 items measure each of the 5 subscales: emotional problems; conduct problems; hyperactivity; peer problems; and prosocial behavior. Parents rated statements as either 0 (not true), 1 (somewhat true), or 2 (certainly true). Subscale scores were computed by summing scores on relevant items after recording reversed scored items that ranged between 1 to 10. A total difficulty score was calculated by summing the scores of the emotional problems, conduct problems, hyperactivity, and peer problems. A higher total score indicate higher problems in socioemotional behavior. The cronbach's alpha of the scale in this study was .73

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis conducted using IBM SPSS 22.0. Descriptive analysis was used to describe sociodemographic information, variable family functioning and socioemotional behavioral of children. The relationship of study variables were measured using Pearson product-moment correlations. The independent sample t-test were computed to examine the mean differences in family functioning and children's socioemotional behavioral of low income family between mother and father.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Participants Background

This study involved 518 participants (259 father and 259 mother). The age of participants was found to range from 22 to 69 years old ( $M = 36.56$   $SD = 7.08$ ). The mean total household monthly income of the

respondents was RM 2045.26 with a standard deviation of 916.86. Results showed that on average participants had 17 years of education ( $SD=2.18$ ). In this study about 51.6% of participants living in urban while others (48.4%) living in rural area.

#### 4.2 Family Functioning and Children Socioemotional Behaviour

Means and standards deviation of family functioning is shown in Table 1 while information on children socioemotional behavior in Table 2.

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations of Measures Family Functioning (N=518)

| Variables                | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|--------------------------|------|--------------------|
| Communication            | 5.14 | .70                |
| Love                     | 5.24 | .67                |
| Support                  | 5.23 | .67                |
| Commitment               | 5.27 | .67                |
| Acceptance               | 5.27 | .65                |
| Religiosity              | 5.50 | .60                |
| Relationship             | 5.30 | .65                |
| Total family functioning | 5.28 | .59                |

Table 2: Children Socioemotional Behaviour (N=518)

| Children Socioemotional Behaviour | n(%)      |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Emotional problems</b>         |           |
| Normal (score 0-3)                | 336(64.9) |
| Borderline (score 4)              | 68(13.1)  |
| Abnormal (score 5-10)             | 114(22.0) |
| <b>Conduct Problems</b>           |           |
| Normal (score 0-2)                | 309(59.7) |
| Borderline (score 3)              | 83(16.0)  |
| Abnormal (score 4-10)             | 126(24.3) |
| <b>Hyperactivity</b>              |           |
| Normal (score 0-5)                | 412(79.5) |
| Borderline(score 6)               | 77(14.9)  |
| Abnormal (score7-10)              | 29(5.6)   |
| <b>Peer problems</b>              |           |
| Normal (score 0-2)                | 186(35.9) |
| Borderline (score 3)              | 23(23.7)  |
| Abnormal (score 4-10)             | 209(40.4) |
| <b>Prosocial behavior</b>         |           |
| Normal (score 6-10)               | 391(75.5) |
| Borderline (score 5)              | 80(24.5)  |
| Abnormal (score 0-4)              | 47(9.1)   |
| <b>Total difficulties</b>         |           |
| Normal (score 0-13)               | 244(47.1) |
| Borderline (score 14-16)          | 108(20.8) |
| Abnormal (score 17-40)            | 166(32.1) |

Family functioning was measured on 6-point Likert-type scales with higher scores representing higher level of family functioning. The midpoint of the scale is 3. The participants' mean score on total MFSS was 5.28 indicating that participants, on average rated their family functioning as high level. The similar pattern also can be seen for all dimensions of family

functioning. Analysis of data in Table 2 showed that 47.1% of the children were considered as normal for the overall socioemotional behaviour, while 32.1% reached abnormal levels in the SDQ total difficulties score. For the individual subscales, the highest percentage of abnormal level was reported in a peer problems (40.4%) while the lowest abnormal level was reported in hyperactivity (5.6%).

Table 3: Correlation between family functioning and children socioemotional behaviour

| Variables                | Emotional problems | Conduct Problems | Hyperactivity | Peer problems | Prosocial behavior | Total difficulties |
|--------------------------|--------------------|------------------|---------------|---------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Communication            | -.12**             | -.16**           | .06           | -.16**        | .16**              | -.18**             |
| Love                     | -.08               | -.16**           | .07           | -.13**        | .13**              | -.14**             |
| Support                  | -.11*              | -.17**           | .05           | -.17**        | .15**              | -.17**             |
| Commitment               | -.12**             | -.15**           | .03           | -.13**        | .10*               | -.15**             |
| Acceptance               | -.11*              | -.18**           | .04           | -.12**        | .11*               | -.16**             |
| Religiosity              | -.05               | -.11*            | .02           | -.11*         | .10*               | -.09*              |
| Relationship             | -.06               | -.12**           | .04           | -.12**        | .14**              | -.12**             |
| Total family functioning | -.10*              | -.17**           | .05           | -.15**        | .14**              | -.16**             |

Note: \*p<.01, \*\*p<.05

#### 4.3 Relationship between Family Functioning and Children's Socioemotional Behavior

Correlational analysis were used to explore the relationships among the study variables in the study. The results of the study showed family functioning was negatively associated with the children's socioemotional behavior. Based on Table 3, the findings showed that all dimensions of family functioning negatively correlated with conduct problems and peer problem while positively correlated with prosocial behavior of the children. Meanwhile, the results if the study revealed that only four out of seven sub-dimension of family functioning negatively correlated with children's emotional problems: communication, support, commitment and acceptance.

#### 4.4 Differences in perceived family functioning and children's socioemotional behavior between mother and father

Independent sample t-test analysis was employed to compare the mean scores of two different groups of people (mother and father) in perceived family functioning and children socioemotional behavior. Of all the variables investigated, the findings showed that there were no significant differences between mother and father in perceived family functioning and children's socioemotional behavior (Table 4). In other words mother and father of low income family had same level perception in family functioning and children's socioemotional behaviour. The same results also were found for all sub-dimensions of family functioning and children socioemotional behaviour.

Table 4: Difference in perception of family functioning and children socioemotional behaviour between mother and father of low

| Variables                      | income family    |                  | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|--------------------------------|------------------|------------------|----------|----------|
|                                | Mother<br>(M/SD) | Father<br>(M/SD) |          |          |
| <b>Family Functioning</b>      |                  |                  |          |          |
| Communication                  | 15.55/2.06       | 15.32/2.08       | -1.15    | .25      |
| Love                           | 26.30/3.38       | 26.12/3.24       | -.47     | .64      |
| Support                        | 21.05/2.69       | 20.85/2.61       | -.76     | .44      |
| Commitment                     | 15.86/2.03       | 15.79/2.00       | -.24     | .81      |
| Acceptance                     | 21.09/2.71       | 21.01/2.51       | -.19     | .84      |
| Religiosity                    | 22.00/2.52       | 21.93/2.30       | -.34     | .73      |
| Relationship                   | 15.89/2.05       | 15.89/1.81       | -.01     | .99      |
| Total Family Functioning       | 137.73/16.13     | 136.91/14.98     | -.50     | .61      |
| <b>Socioemotional Behavior</b> |                  |                  |          |          |
| Emotional problems             | 7.32/2.20        | 7.12/2.07        | 1.12     | .26      |
| Conduct Problems               | 7.71/1.73        | 7.48/1.79        | 1.63     | .10      |
| Hyperactivity                  | 6.12/1.76        | 5.92/1.70        | 1.38     | .17      |
| Peer problems                  | 7.31/1.58        | 7.00/1.81        | 1.70     | .09      |
| Prosocial behaviour            | 5.50/1.68        | 5.43/1.67        | -.25     | .80      |
| Total difficulties             | 33.95/6.16       | 32.96/6.11       | 1.97     | .05      |

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined the relationship between family functioning and children socioemotional behaviour. As expected, higher level of family functioning was associated with lower level of children socioemotional behavior. This observation is basically consistent with the previous studies that found relationship between family functioning and socioemotional behavior of children [11-13]. Finding from this study provide an evidence that mother and father of low income family had same perception in family functioning and children socioemotional behaviour. The results of this study was in line with previous study that found there was no gender differences in perceived family functioning [14-17].

Some limitations of the present study should be noted. First, the study assessed children socioemotional behaviour only from parents perspective. It would be interesting to compare the parents and teacher perceptions on children socioemotional behaviour and may differ based on different perspective. Additionally, the sample for this study was derived from only Malay parents of low income who have children age four to six years old so the generalizability of these findings is limited to the sample assessed. The present study only used the correlational analysis in the present study, therefore the researchers were unable to make conclusions about the direction effects. Future studies may include any other statistical analysis in order to find interesting findings regarding the effect of

family functioning on children socioemotional behaviour.

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