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The Influence of Family Structure on the Social Behavior of Children with Autism: Based on the Family System Theory

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Abstract:

Changes in family structure have a significant impact on the social development of children with autism (ASD), but current research has mostly focused on the perspectives of parents and siblings, lacking in-depth exploration from the perspective of children with ASD themselves. Based on family systems theory and using qualitative research methods, this study focused on three 5-12-year-old ASD children and their nuclear families (parents and two children) who were the eldest children in the family at Y Rehabilitation Institution in Shanxi Province. Through self-made interview Outlines, in-depth conversations were conducted with parents and responsible teachers. Combined with classroom performance, assessment records and family interaction observations of children with ASD, the mechanism by which changes in family structure (the birth of siblings) affect the social behavior of older children with ASD. The results showed that the birth of A second child had a differentiated impact on older children with ASD: A and C showed positive changes such as active sharing and improved language expression; B showed problems such as social withdrawal due to insufficient family guidance. Family interaction guidance and attention distribution are key influencing factors. This study fills the gap in existing research exploring the impact of changes in family structure from the perspective of children with ASD, providing a practical reference for understanding the developmental needs of children with ASD in multi-child families and theoretical support for formulating targeted education and intervention strategies for multi-child autistic families. However, the study has limitations such as a small sample size and a lack of in-depth analysis of potential influencing factors such as family economic conditions. In the future, the sample size can be expanded and more variables can be included for in-depth research.

Keywords: Autism, family structure, Social behavior, family systems theory

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1. Introduction

Researchers observed in practice at special schools and rehabilitation institutions that some parents, when talking about their children's learning, would unconsciously compare the abilities of children with ASD with those of other children in the family; In some families, after the arrival of the second child, parents showed significant changes in their attention and parenting styles towards their children with ASD; More notably, some children with ASD have shown strong confrontational emotions or inappropriate behaviors when facing their younger siblings, such as aggressive behavior and excessive avoidance... (Kasari et al., 2010)[1]. The changes in resource allocation, care patterns and emotional support caused by structural differences in the family as the primary place for individual socialization may exacerbate or alleviate the social predicament of children with ASD (Dabrowska et al., 2010)[2]. For example, excessive parental pressure in single-parent families may reduce parent-child interaction time and further undermine the development of children's social skills; In multi-generational main families, the involvement of grandparents may provide more social practice opportunities for children with ASD. Therefore, delving deeper into the connection between changes in family structure and the social development of children with ASD is of urgent practical significance for improving their quality of life and promoting social integration. However, through a review of existing research, it is found that most current studies on the family system of children with autism focus on parents and siblings, while studies exploring the impact of family structure changes from the perspective of the children themselves are relatively scarce, making it difficult to fully reveal the intrinsic connection between the family system and the development of children with ASD. Based on practical observations and real needs, this study takes autistic children as the core research subjects and delves into the mechanism by which family structure changes affect their development, aiming to fill the existing research gap and provide theoretical support for improving the family education system for autistic children.

2. Relevant Research

2.1 Social Behavior in Children with Autism

The core features of ASD mainly include social communication disorders, repetitive stereotyped behaviors and narrow interests. Social communication disorders are manifested at all stages and are a key basis for diagnosing ASD (DSM-5, 2013)[3].

The cognitive abilities of ASD patients, such as attention, memory, imagination and reasoning ability, affect their social behavior. Attention deficit may make it difficult for patients to focus on the social signals of others, resulting in an inability to respond to others in a timely manner; Memory and reasoning impairments may affect a patient's understanding and memory of social rules and situations, leading to inappropriate social behavior (Happé & Frith, 2006)[4].

2.2 Family Systems Theory

developmental behavior is shaped and reshaped in the interweaving of interactions and relationships, and that the behavior and emotional state of each member will affect the others. The change or distress of one member may trigger a chain reaction within the family. Among the many factors that affect the development of a child's social skills, the way parents interact with the child is particularly crucial. Studies suggest that children with ASD have less interaction with their parents compared to the average child, and this lack of parent-child interaction may lead to difficulties in emotion recognition, expression, and differentiation in children (Costa, Steffgen, Vögele, 2019)[5]. Meanwhile, the quality of parent-child interaction has a positive effect on the development of social and emotional abilities in children with ASD, and emotional support from parents and family cohesion can have a positive promoting effect on children's social skills (Haven, Manangan, Sparrow, Wilson, 2014)[6].

Therefore, from the perspective of family systems theory, when the family structure changes, so-called family stress or family problems may arise, which not only alter the overall function of the family but may also affect the developmental function of individual family members. Family structure is a core element of the family system, and different types of family structure have different effects on the development of special children. The changes in family structure referred to in this study are changes in the number of core family members. Studies have shown that stable and complete family structures, such as the nuclear family and the main family, usually provide a more favorable growth environment for special children (Hao et al., 2024)[7]. In such families, special children may receive more emotional support, financial security and educational resources, which contribute to their physical, cognitive, emotional and social development. In contrast, family structures such as divorced remarried families and left-behind foster families, which lack family resilience, are prone to problems such as apathy and isolation in special children, which can pose obstacles to their development and progress (Tian Boqiong et al., 2023)[8].

Based on the family systems theory, the psychotherapy

model is dedicated to helping parents of children with special needs deal with the psychological trauma caused by their children's disabilities, optimizing the family environment, and promoting the growth of children with special needs. Personalized interventions implemented in a suitable family environment can, to some extent, enhance the communication skills, comprehension and expression skills of children with ASD, reduce the occurrence of behavioral problems, and thereby improve their quality of life. At the same time, there is a common problem in the field of ASD rehabilitation: the scarcity of therapists or teachers and the large number of children. As a result, family intervention is bound to become the development direction of the intervention model for children with ASD internationally (Luo et al., 2019)[9].

3. Research Process

with parents and primary teachers of children with ASD through interviews, and observing interactions between children with autism and their family members, including parents and siblings. At the same time, based on the past classroom performance and assessment records of children with ASD, this study delves into the association between the social skills of children with autism and their family structure, in order to understand how changes in family member structure affect the social skills of children with autism.

3.1 Selection of the Research Subjects

This study selected three children with ASD (Autism spectrum Disorder) and their families from the Y Rehabilitation institution in Shanxi Province as subjects, all of whom met the selection criteria set in this study:
The age range is limited to between 5 and 12 years old.
2. The family composition should be a nuclear family consisting of parents and two children, with parents as the main caregivers;
3. Children with ASD should be the elder brother or sister in the family.

Table 1 Basic Case Information

NUMBER	A	B	C
NAME	HF	JX	LH
AGE	7.5	9	8
GENDER	male	male	female
SIBLING AGE	5	4	5.5
SIBLING GENDER	male	male	male
BEHAVIORAL CHARACTERISTICS	Active language is the main focus, but the language clarity is poor, which makes it difficult for others to understand. The willingness to actively socialize is high.	Language is mainly imitational, and has poor willingness to communicate actively. Sometimes there are behaviors of ignoring people and screaming, which disappears quickly after being stopped.	There are few active languages, the main content is to make requirements, and there is low social initiative, but I am willing to passively engage in social behavior.

3.2 Research Process

During the study, researchers used a self-made interview outline to have an in-depth conversation with parents and teachers. From the accounts of parents and teachers, we can see that the arrival of a second child is a complex emotional transition for older autistic children.
When asked about the impact of the birth of the second child on the older child, the mother of respondent A mentioned that the younger brother was more extroverted and could help the timid elder brother adapt to the new environment, such as pulling the elder brother to participate in external activities and giving the elder brother a sense of security. The elder brother, who was not fond of sharing before, is now willing to share with his younger brother and even takes his brother's hand out. This was rarely seen before. The teacher in charge of interviewee A also said: A loves playing with his younger brother and always looks very happy whenever his younger brother comes to pick him up from school. He showed a strong desire to express and share with his brother, which he did not have when communicating with other children. The mother of interviewee C voluntarily referred to the change in C's attitude towards his younger brother: at first, C felt repelled as if a stranger had broken into her world. However, as time went on and positive interaction led, C began to approach her brother proactively, gently stroking his head

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or cheek. “When we noticed this, she would also seem a little shy.”

Regarding the challenges encountered in raising two children, the account of respondent C’s mother is thought-provoking: “When the second child was just born, our family was worried that we might neglect C, so we gave C more attention, but unintentionally neglected the younger child. However, C was more concerned about her younger brother than we were. After realizing the problem, we adjusted in time and now we are trying to treat it fairly.” The family of respondent B faced the same challenge: the younger brother was always reluctant to play with the elder brother, especially when competing for the mother’s attention, and their parents noticed this but did not come up with a good solution. The teacher in charge of B also mentioned this: “Every time B’s younger brother came to pick him up with his mother, he was more silent than usual.”

4. Conclusion

Overall, the birth of younger siblings does bring about significant changes in the emotions and behaviors of older autistic children, and these changes vary significantly and are not a single positive or negative trend. Older children with autism show different adaptive states in different family Settings and interaction patterns, which also reflects the important role of multi-child interactions in the family system in the development of children with autism.

On the positive impact level, some older autistic children showed significant improvement in social and emotional expression skills after the birth of their younger siblings. In the case of respondent A, the mother mentioned that the extroverted personality of the younger brother effectively motivated the originally timid A, not only encouraging A to actively participate in external activities and gain A sense of security, but also acting as A “social assistant” to the outside world to help other children understand A’s language; At the same time, A also learned to play the role of a “protector” to protect his brother. Respondent C also showed positive changes. Although initially repelled by the birth of his brother, under the guidance of continuous positive interaction, C gradually approached his brother proactively, showing affectionate behaviors such as gently stroking his brother’s head or cheek, and showing shyness when parents noticed this change. All these behaviors reflect C’s progress in emotional perception and expression. In addition, the intervention training records and interviews showed that language expression abilities of A and C also improved, as indicated by an increase in the number of active languages and a significant increase in the frequency of referring to siblings, suggesting that the presence of younger siblings provided them with more scenarios for language practice and emotional communication, promoting the development of their language functions.

On the negative impact level, in some families, the birth of younger siblings has a negative impact on older autistic children, and the situation of respondent B is particularly typical. In terms of family interaction, B’s younger brother showed behavior of refusing to play with B and competing for his mother’s attention, and although parents were aware of this problem, they failed to find an effective solution; The teacher observed that whenever the younger brother came to pick up B from school with his mother, B was more taciturn than usual, socially active significantly reduced, and more prone to negative emotions. This phenomenon suggests that when families fail to create a stable and fair interactive environment for older autistic children and fail to provide timely guidance for the children’s negative emotions resulting from sibling competition, the birth of younger siblings may exacerbate the social withdrawal of older autistic children and even cause emotional problems, adversely affecting their physical and mental development

Further analysis of the reasons for the differences reveals that the way family interaction is guided and the distribution of attention to the family are the key factors. In the families of respondents A and C, parents created a supportive and warm family atmosphere for the older autistic children either by actively guiding the interaction between the children or by the naturally formed positive driving relationship among the children; In the family of respondent B, parents lacked effective intervention strategies when dealing with conflicts between children and failed to balance their attention to the two children, resulting in B being at a disadvantage in sibling relationships and thus generating negative counteremotions. At the same time, the personality traits of autistic children themselves (such as A being timid and C being initially repelled) can also affect the speed at which they adapt to the new family structure, but guidance and support at the family level can largely alleviate their initial discomfort and push them in a positive direction.

5. Research Recommendations and Limitations

Based on the research findings, the following targeted educational recommendations are proposed for autistic children in multi-child families:

1.Strengthen Interaction Guidance: Enhance direct interaction with autistic children, increase their time spent with siblings, and guide siblings to engage in positive and con-

structive interactions.

2.Uphold Fair Attention Allocation: Adhere to the principle of fairness when distributing family attention, reduce biased treatment among different children, and thereby alleviate the potential negative impacts of family structure changes on older autistic children.

3.Foster Harmonious Family Relationships: Attach importance to building harmonious internal family relationships. Through the fair distribution of attention and family resources, promote positive sibling relationships and minimize the adverse effects of family structure changes on autistic children.

This study, through specific family cases, demonstrates the diverse impacts of family structure changes on older autistic children, providing practical references for understanding the developmental needs of autistic children in multi-child families. However, the study has certain limitations: the sample size is small (only three families), and in-depth analysis of potential influencing factors such as family economic status and parental education level is lacking. Future research could expand the sample scope, incorporate more variables, and further explore the comprehensive effects of different factors on the adaptation process of older autistic children. This would provide more targeted educational and intervention suggestions for multi-child families with autistic children, helping autistic children achieve better development in the family environment.

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