

Parents' Care for Their Child's Mental Life: Rural Case of Vu Thu District, Thai Binh Province

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Abstract: This article aims to find out how parents in the rural area of Vu Thu district, Thai Binh province care about their children's mental life. The analysis data is based on the author's survey on "The current situation of child care in rural families in Vu Thu district, Thai Binh province" conducted from May to October 2020 on 3 rural communes of Vu Thu district, Thai Binh province. Questionnaire interviews were conducted with 412 parents of primary school age children (from 6 to 10 years old). The analysis results show that younger parents tend to take care of all their children's problems and take better care of their children than the older parents. Parents who are public servants tend to take better care of their children than parents of other occupational groups. More educated parents tend to spend more time with their children. The higher the standard of living, the better the children are mentally cared for. Women and mothers are expected to take the caregiving role and have the main responsibility for taking care of their children's mental life.

Keywords: Children; Childcare; Children's mental life.

1. Introduction

Caring for children is not only about physical health but also to ensure children have comprehensive mental health. Parents have the main role in taking care of their children in general and taking care of their mental life in particular. Taking care of their children's mental life, listening to their children's feelings and emotions not only helps parents and children understand each other better, but

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also gives them peace of mind, helping them to soar in life as they have a strong solid foundation.

The personal characteristics of the parents and the family characteristics are closely related to how they are taking care of their children's mental life (Tran Quy Long, 2014). In the studied families, the mother is emotionally closer to her children than the father. Younger children need more care and their mothers are always there for them to rely on, also, she is practicing child care activities, both physically and mentally, higher than the father (Nguyen Huu Minh, 2012). Not only the content but also the form and means of taking care of the children's mental life of each parent and each family is different, specifically, families with a high standard of living are different from the lower living standard group, intellectual parents are different from manual worker parents, highly educated parents are different from low educated parents, young parents are different from older parents (Tran Quy Long, 2014).

The family's socio-economic characteristics contribute to the unique identity of that family relationship. Parents tend to pay more attention to their children's friends in families with higher incomes (Tran Thi Van Anh et al., 2011). The same goes for knowing where their children usually hang out. The percentage of parents in the highest income quintile knowing where their children often go to play is higher than parents in the lower income quintile (Tran Quy Long, 2014). An individual's age, education, and occupation can also create individual psychological characteristics for each person and make the relationship between them and other family members stronger or loosen (Nguyen Huu Minh, 2013). The education level of parents has a significant influence on how they care for their children. Parents with a high level of education will have the opportunity to realize the importance of caring for their children and understand how to take care of them. Parents with primary school education or less are less likely to know their children's best friends than parents from higher education groups (Tran Thi Van Anh et al., 2011). The age of parents is related to the extent to which parents know their children's psychological and emotional problems, and in the older age groups, parents have a lower rate of knowing. The percentage of parents who know their children's difficulties also varies according to the parents' occupation. Accordingly, wage earners have the highest rate of knowledge about children's

problems compared to parents in the service/cottage industries, agriculture, and non-working groups (Tran Quy Long, 2014).

Spending time to play and talk with their children is a way that parents choose to show their care and desire to understand their children's thoughts, feelings and well-being (Dang Bich Thuy, 2012). Parents' attention and close emotional relationships will contribute significantly to helping their children feel confident, develop the dynamism and flexibility needed to solve life's challenges (Tran Quy Long, 2014).

Over the last years, although child care has been a topic of research from many angles and aspects, parents taking care of children's mental life in rural areas and the influence of different family groups on children's caring have not been studied extensively. By studying how parents in rural areas of Vu Thu district, Thai Binh province care for their children, we can see a realistic and up-to-date picture of the parents' care for their children's mental life.

2. Data and methods

This paper is part of the survey for my self-funding thesis "*The current situation of child care in rural families in Vu Thu district, Thai Binh province*". The survey was conducted from May to October 2020 on 3 rural communes of Vu Thu district, Thai Binh province. Questionnaire interviews were conducted with 412 parents of primary school age children (from 6 to 10 years old). Table 1 describes the quantity and percentage of each group. Calculation data and analysis in this paper are based on the number of samples by sub-groups as below (see Table 1).

This study uses a structural-functional approach of Parsons. The structural-functional theory considers the family as a social institution, performing certain essential functions for society (Parsons, Bales, 1955). Family performs important functions such as raising children, economically supporting the members and ensuring their mental and emotional life. Currently, along with the change in family structure and function, the difference in life concepts, values, and standards between parents and children, child care and ensure good education are quite challenging with many families (Nguyen Xuan Thang, 2019). The structural-functional theory is applied to study how parents in rural families in Vu Thu district performing the function of taking care of their children's mental life.

Table 1. Sample description

		(N = 412)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	137	33.3
	Female	275	66.7
Age	Under 36	136	33.0
	From 36 to 40	141	34.2
	From 41 and above	135	32.8
Educational level	Lower Secondary and below	173	42.0
	Upper Secondary	102	24.8
	Vocational high school, college	78	18.9
	University, post-graduate	59	14.3
Occupation	Farmer	101	24.5
	Worker	155	37.6
	Public servants	75	18.2
	Business, self-employed	81	19.7
Family's living standard	Good	82	19.9
	Average	290	70.4
	Poor	40	9.7

Source: Data from the survey.

The survey also used a socialization approach of Smelser to understand how parental caregiving affects their children's mental well-being. During the socialization process, children gain experiences from their parents and family. In one family, parents play the most important role in the socialization process of each member in general, and children in particular. Children are taught, given chance to exchange, interact, and learn from family experiences to gradually grow up (Smelser, 1976). Socialization theory is applied to understand the process of socialization at primary school age (6-10 years old), as at this age, young generation begins to have clearer perceptions about life than in childhood. At this stage, whether parents take good care of the children's mental life will affect their life in the future.

From the above approaches, our research question is how rural families in Vu Thu district, Thai Binh province are taking care of their children? What factors affect the care of children's mental life in rural families now? This study was analyzed the characteristics and behaviors of respondents (fathers or mothers). Children's mental life includes many different aspects, however, this paper will focus on some activities as follows: parents take their children out to entertain them; parents

talk and play with their children; parents know about their children's entertainment activities; parents participate in school activities with their children. In addition to describing the situation, this paper will analyze the parents' caregiving activities for their children's mental life in terms of the parents' characteristics. Chi-square statistical tests were applied to two-variable analyses.

Dependent variables include the extent that the parents taking their children to entertainment places (once a week/ once a month/ on big holidays/ once a year/ never); parents talking and playing with their children (every day/ every week/ every month/ once or twice a year/ never); parents knowing well about their children's entertainment activities; parents participating in school activities with their children.

The independent variables used in the analysis include: parent's age; parent's sex; parent's education, parent's occupation, and family's standard of living.

3. Parents taking care of their children's mental life according to social groups

3.1 Parents take their children to entertainment places

The extent to which parents often take their children out to play shows the emotional closeness of parents to their children. The survey shows that the entertainment places for Vu Thu district's children are the village cultural houses or communal house/temple yards, or a few private amusement parks and private swimming pools. Because Vu Thu is a district adjacent to Thai Binh city, parents sometimes let their children go to the center of Thai Binh city for entertainment during weekends or on special occasions. It can be seen that the forms of entertainment of children in Vu Thu district are quite monotonous and within a limited range around the family's house. Table 2 presents the correlation between how often parents take their children to play with some socio-demographic characteristics of respondents and their families.

The survey shows that, due to the limited family economic conditions and infrastructure for children to play in the rural area, "taking children out on big holidays" is preferred by parents in rural villages in Vu Thu district, Thai Binh province with 51.5% of respondents. The number of people taking their children out once a week accounted for only 9%. 16.3% take their children out for fun once a month; 8.7% once a year and 14.6% have never taken their children out for fun or to children's entertainment places (see Table 2).

Table 2. The extent to which parents often take their children to entertainment places by respondents' characteristics (%)

	Once a week	Once a month	On big holidays	Once a year	Never
Sex					
Male	10.2	14.6	47.4	9.5	18.2
Female	8.4	17.1	53.5	8.4	12.7
Age ***					
Under 36	6.6	29.4	52.9	8.1	2.9
From 36 to 40	7.1	13.5	51.8	14.2	13.5
From 41 and above	13.3	5.9	49.6	3.7	27.4
Educational level ***					
Lower Secondary and below	4.0	10.4	53.8	6.9	24.9
Upper Secondary	5.9	20.6	49.0	15.7	8.8
Vocational high school, college	20.5	17.9	48.7	2.6	10.3
University, post-graduate	13.6	23.7	52.5	10.2	
Occupation ***					
Farmer	9.9	2.0	39.6	11.9	36.6
Worker	8.4	20.0	56.8	5.8	9.0
Public servants	12.0	25.3	52.0	10.7	
Business, self-employed	6.2	18.5	55.6	8.6	11.1
Family's living standard***					
Good	13.4	19.5	61.0	6.1	
Average	8.6	16.9	48.3	9.7	16.6
Poor	2.5	5.0	55.0	7.5	30.0
Total	9.0	16.3	51.5	8.7	14.6

Statistical Significance Level: *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$

Source: Data from the survey.

The frequency of taking children out to entertainment places is closely related to the parents' sex. The percentage of mothers taking their children out is higher than this rate among fathers. Mothers taking their children out once a week and once a month are 25.5% and fathers are 24.6%. Especially, 18.2% of fathers have never taken their children out to entertain, but this rate of mothers is only 12.7%. This fact speaks out the important role of mothers in these child care activities. Mothers are always close, caring and spend more time taking care of their children than fathers.

The frequency of taking children out to entertain is closely related to the parents' age groups. The analysis data shows that young parents have a higher level of taking their children out to entertain more often. For example, with a group of parents under 36 years old, the weekly and monthly outside entertainment activity rate is 36.0%, while that of 36-40 year old parents is 20.6% and over 41 year old is 19.2%. The percentage of the parents over 41 years old who "never take their children out for fun" is 27.4%, double that of the group of 36-40 years old and 9 times higher than that of the group under 36 years old.

The frequency of taking children out to entertain varies significantly according to the educational level of parents. Accordingly, the more educated parents are, the higher the percentage of taking their children out to play. The analysis data shows that the percentage of parents with a lower secondary education level who take their children out to entertainment places weekly and monthly is only 14.4%, parents with vocational high school education are 26.5%, while parents with vocational high school and college education are 38.4% and parents with university and postgraduate education are 37.3%. And vice versa, the percentage of parents who "have never taken their children out to entertain them" who have lower secondary education and below accounts for the highest rate of 24.9%, much higher than the group of parents with higher education, especially compared to the group of parents with a university degree or higher, in this group, there are no parents who have never taken their children out to entertainment place. It can be seen that parents with a higher education level are more aware of the importance and role of entertainment for their children, so they take better care of their children's entertainment.

The frequency of taking children out to entertain is closely related to the parents' occupation. Parents in the group of public servants (that include cadres, civil servants and public employees) seem to be most interested in taking their children out to entertain compared to parents in the remaining occupational groups. The percentage of parents taking their children out weekly and monthly among public servants accounts for the highest one with 37.3%, while these in the group of parents who are farmers are 11.9%, parents who are workers are 28.4% and parents who are doing business, self-employed is 24.7%. No parents in the group of public servants that have never taken their children out to play, while farmer parents are 36.6%, manual worker parents are 9% and parents who are doing business, self-employed are 11.1%. Parents in the group of public servants are

highly educated, so, reasonably, they are aware of their children's need for going out for entertainment better than parents in other occupational groups, also, and they spent more time with their children.

The frequency of taking children out to entertain is closely related to the family's living standards. While the percentage of families with a good living standard taking their children out to entertain weekly and monthly is 32.9%, this drops to 25.5% in families with average living standards and only 9.5% in poor families. While no parents in the good economical condition group have never taken their children out, the percentage is very high in the poor group. The difference in the percentage of parents who have never taken their children out between the two groups of parents in the family group with the highest standard of living and the group with the lowest standard of living is 42.9 percentage points. This fact shows that families with higher living standards have better conditions to take care of their children's mental life.

3.2. Parents talking and playing with their children

The frequency of talking and playing with children is an important indicator to assess parents' mental care for their children. Through talking and playing with their children, parents have a better understanding of the thoughts, feelings, and mental life of their children. Parents, while talking with their children, are involving their children in both communication and educational activities in psychological and emotional life. The parents' active role helps connect the relationship between parents and children, especially at their early ages. The cohesion in the relationship between parents and children can be directly proportional to the initiative of parents in daily conversation with their children about mental and emotional life (Nguyen Huu Minh, Ngo Thi Tuan Dung, 2013).

Our survey of parents in the rural Vu Thu district shows that the vast majority of parents in this study spend time talking/playing with their children every day (90.3%). However, there are still 2.9% of those who "never" talk/play with their children, possibly due to deep-seated reasons for personality traits, for parents' occupation characteristics i.e. they are working away from home, etc. that they are unable to spend time talking/playing with their children (see Table 3).

There is not much difference between mothers and fathers in talking/playing with their children every day and every week. Comparing by age group of parents, it can be seen that the age group 36-40 has a higher level of talking/playing with

their children than the other two age groups. The percentage of parents who “never” talk to or play with their children in the age group 41 and older is higher than in the two younger groups of parents (see Table 3).

Table 3. Frequency of parents talking and playing with their children (%)

	Every day	Every week	Every month	Once or twice a year	Never
Sex					
Male	88.3	5.8		1.5	4.4
Female	91.3	4.0	0.7	1.8	2.2
Age ***					
Under 36	89.7	5.9	0.7	2.2	1.5
From 36 to 40	93.6	2.1	0.7	2.8	0.7
From 41 and above	87.4	5.9			6.7
Educational level					
Lower Secondary and below	89.6	6.4		2.3	1.7
Upper Secondary	88.2	2.0	1.0	2.0	6.9
Vocational high school, college	92.3	5.1			2.6
University, post-graduate	93.2	3.4	1.7	1.7	
Occupation ***					
Farmer	87.1	5.9		1.0	5.9
Worker	89.0	6.5	0.6	3.2	0.6
Public servants	93.3	4.0	1.3	1.3	
Business, self-employed	93.8				6.2
Family's living standard***					
Good	90.2	7.3	2.4		
Average	91.0	3.4		1.4	4.1
Poor	85.0	7.5		7.5	
Total	90.3	4.6	0.5	1.7	2.9

Statistical Significance Level: *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$

Source: Data from the survey.

Parents who are public servants have the highest percentage of talking/playing with their children every day, however, business and self-employed parents have the highest percentage of not talking/playing with their children every day (6.2%), followed by the farmer group.

The frequency of parents talking/playing with their children is not significantly correlated with parents' educational level but is strongly correlated with the family's standard of living. While parents in families with a good standard of living have a high percentage of talking/playing with their children every day of 90.2%, families with an average living standard are 91.0% and lowest of 85% in poor families. It can be seen that families with a better standard of living giving a higher level of parental care, talking and playing with their children.

3.3 Parents knowing about their children's entertainment activities

The extent to which parents know their children's entertainment activities is an important indicator that reflects parents' attention in their children's mental and emotional life. The extent to which parents know about their children's entertainment activities reflects parents' attention in their children's mental and emotional life. Data from the survey show that 57.6% of parents “knowing well about their children's entertainment activities (see Table 4).

Comparing by sex of caregivers, it can be seen that there is a difference in the percentage of “knowing well their children's entertainment activities” between fathers and mothers. Like most issues related to their children, the mothers have a higher percentage of “knowing” about their children's entertainment activities than the fathers (61.1% versus 50.4%).

The higher the age group of parents, the lower the rate of knowing well about children's entertainment activities. This percentage among the youngest parent group (under 36 years old) is 1.47 times higher than in the oldest group (41 years and older). The group of parents with a university education or higher has the highest rate of knowing about their children's entertainment activities with 84.7% and about 1.4 times higher than the percentage of parents who answered knowing about their children's entertainment in lower education groups.

The percentage of well knowing about children's entertainment activities also has a big difference according to the parents' occupations. This percentage in the group of parents who are public servants accounts for 78.7% (the highest group), much higher than the group of parents in other occupations, and 3.3 times higher than the group of farmer parents which is 23.9% (lowest group).

This is similar when comparing the percentage of parents who know well about their children's entertainment activities and the family's living standard. Parents

with a high standard of living account for 73% while in the average living standard families, it is 54.4%, and 47.6% in the poor living standard families.

Table 4. Data from the survey show that 57.6% of parents “know well their children's entertainment activities”

	Parents know well about their children's entertainment activities
Sex *	
Male	50.4
Female	61.1
Age ***	
Under 36	71.4
From 36 to 40	52.9
From 41 and above	48.4
Educational level ***	
Lower Secondary and below	49.7
Upper Secondary	60.4
Vocational high school, college	50.0
University, post-graduate	84.7
Occupation ***	
Farmer	23.9
Worker	67.5
Public servants	78.7
Business, self-employed	58.0
Family's living standard**	
Good	73.0
Average	54.4
Poor	47.6
Total	57.6

Statistical Significance Level: *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$

Source: Data from the survey.

3.4. Parents participating in school activities with their children

According to the other researchers, parents' relationships with school, teachers and friends of their children is the initial basis for the parents to show their care for the children's psychological and emotional life (Le Ngoc Lan, 2016). However, this survey results show that the percentage of parents participating

in some activities at school with their children every year is quite low, accounting for only 47.6% (see Table 5).

Table 5. Percentage of the parents participating in school activities with their children (%)

	Parents participating in their children's school activities
Sex ***	
Male	33.6
Female	54.5
Age	
Under 36	52.2
From 36 to 40	49.6
From 41 and above	40.7
Educational level**	
Lower Secondary and below	43.4
Upper Secondary	42.2
Vocational high school, College	53.8
University, Post-graduate	61.0
Occupation	
Farmer	44.6
Business, self-employed	42.0
Worker	48.4
Public servants	56.0
Family's living standard in the local area	
Good	40.2
Average	50.3
Poor	52.4
Total	47.6

Statistical Significance Level: *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$

Source: Data from the survey.

The percentages of parents participating in their children's school activities are significantly different between father and mother. The mothers have a much higher percentage than the fathers with 54.5% and 33.6% respectively.

The percentage of parents participating in their children's school activities also has a difference between age groups under 36, 36-40, and 41 and older are

52.2%; 49.6% and 40.7% respectively. It can be seen that the younger parents are, the more likely they care and participate in their children's school activities.

More educated parents tend to spend more time with their children's school activities. While this percentage among parents with lower secondary school education is 43.4%, it is 61% in the group with university and postgraduate education. Arguably, more educated parents have a perception of the value of participating in activities with their children, so they participate in their children's activities more than those with less education.

The parents's occupations are related to their participation with the children's school activities. Those who are public servants have the highest percentages. Business and self-employed parents have the lowest and farmer parents have second-lowest percentages.

4. Conclusions

Children represent a special social group. The emotional relationship between parents and children during the childhood stage is important throughout the children's development. The education and care of children in general and during the 6-10 year old period are the most difficult for parents because, during this period, children have many physiological and psychological changes (Dang Bich Thuy, 2012). Therefore, parents need to attend to and take care mental and emotional life of their children during this period.

The parents in rural areas of Vu Thu district, Thai Binh province have paid much attention to improving the mental life of their children, i.e. spending time taking and playing with their children, caring about their emotional needs, knowing well about their children's friends and so on. This is partly due to the multi-dimensional impact of economic and social changes and the perception of the younger parents compared to the older parents.

The survey results confirm some findings from previous studies on disparities in caring for children's life among various groups of parents (Tran Thi Van Anh et al., 2011; Nguyen Huu Minh, 2012; Dang Bich Thuy, 2012; Tran Quy Long, 2014; Le Ngoc Lan, 2016; Nguyen Xuan Thang, 2019; etc.). Younger parents tend to be more concerned with all aspects of their children's mental life, taking better care of their children than older groups of parents. Parents who are public servants tend to take better care of their children than parents of

other occupational groups. More educated parents tend to spend more time with their children. The higher the families' standard of living, the better the children are cared for mentally. The survey on child care practices of parents in rural Vu Thu district, Thai Binh province once again confirms that despite the changes in traditional gender stereotypes, mothers are likely more expected to take the main responsibility in the families in taking care of and educating their children in general, and taking care of their children's mental life in particular.

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