

Family Socioeconomic Status and Young Children's Social Competence: The Mediating Role of Maternal Parenting Stress

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Abstract

Objective: To examine how family socioeconomic status (SES), maternal parenting stress, and young children's social competence and problem behaviours are interrelated. **Methods:** Six-hundred-twenty-seven mothers of 3- to 6-year-olds completed the Parenting Stress Index-Short Form (PSI-SF), the Social Competence and Behaviour Evaluation-30 (SCBE-30), and a family SES questionnaire. **Results:** (1) SES positively predicted children's social competence ($\beta = 0.187$, $p < 0.01$) and negatively predicted internalising and externalising problems ($\beta = -0.117$, $p < 0.01$; $\beta = -0.10$, $p < 0.05$). (2) Parenting distress and parent-child dysfunctional interaction partially mediated the SES $\rightarrow$ competence path (25.6 % and 27.6 % of total effects, respectively) and fully mediated the SES $\rightarrow$ problem-behaviour paths (79.4 %, 68 %, and 96.3 %). **Conclusions:** SES influences young children's social development not only directly but also entirely through its impact on maternal parenting stress. Implications for parent-support interventions are discussed.

Keywords

socioeconomic status; social competence; internalising problems; externalising problems; parenting stress; mediation; early childhood



1. Introduction

In the field of child development, social competence constitutes a key component of early psychological growth. It refers to the capacity to achieve interpersonal success and to display socially appropriate behaviors during social interactions [1,2]. The early emergence of such competence marks the beginning of individual socialization and is thus highly consequential for children's overall development. Children who are more socially competent find it easier to establish positive relationships with both peers and adults [3]. China's Guidelines for Learning and Development of Children Aged 3–6 explicitly highlight the importance of young children's social-emotional development. In 2022, the Ministry of Education's Guidelines for Scientific Transition between Kindergarten and Primary School designated "social readiness" as one of four major preparatory tasks for school entry.

Children's social competence develops within the broader social system and arises through continuous interactions with peers, parents, and the environment [4]. Extant empirical work has largely focused on parenting styles; for example, grand-parent involvement is positively associated with young children's social competence [5], and parents' participation in home education significantly predicts children's concurrent social skills [6,7]. Yet several dramatic social incidents have recently fuelled public debate about whether family socioeconomic status (SES) shapes students' psychological and social outcomes. In his lecture "The Age of Empty Hearts and Anxiety Economics", psychologist Xu Kaiwen noted that "among 38 university students experiencing psychological crisis, 50 % came from teacher families." Cases such as the "Peking University matricide" and the "impoverished student Ma Jiajue" have further prompted discussion of how parental income, occupation, and other SES indicators relate to children's social development. Research indicates that SES encompasses family economic, human, and social capital that can provide richer material resources, services, parenting practices, and beneficial social relationships for children [8]. A large body of international evidence shows that SES affects children's cognitive, emotional, and behavioural development [9,10]. In China, however, SES studies have focused primarily on academic achievement [11–13], with comparatively little direct examination of its impact on young children's social-emotional outcomes. Therefore, we propose Hypothesis 1: Family SES will significantly predict young children's social competence and problem behaviours.

The Family Stress Model contends that economic hardship markedly increases parental psychological distress, thereby reducing the quality of parent-child interactions [14–17]. Families with lower SES often face low income, job instability, poor housing, food insecurity, and long working hours, leading to insufficient parenting time and even domestic violence [18]. As a distal system variable, SES must therefore operate through more proximal variables to affect child development. Abidin [19] argues that parents' access to social resources partly determines their level of parenting stress. Such stress exerts strong direct effects on children's behavioural and emotional problems [20] and is more closely related to children's social competence and classroom conduct than to specific parenting practices [21]. U.S. studies reveal that the severity of economic hardship is positively associated with economic pressure, which in turn predicts caregivers' emotional distress; these factors negatively forecast children's positive social adaptation and positively predict internalising and externalising problems [17]. Parental stress also affects children's internalising symptoms

and social deficits [22,23]. Children of mothers reporting high parenting stress tend to exhibit poor social cognition, limited language expression, weak emotional regulation, and inadequate interaction skills [24,25]. In sum, we propose Hypothesis 2: Family SES influences young children's social development through its impact on maternal parenting stress (see Figure 1).

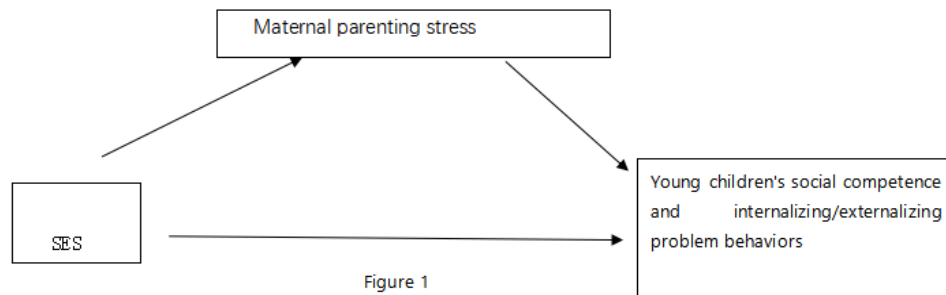


Figure 1
Mediation Model of Maternal Parenting Stress

Hypothesis 1: Family SES will significantly predict Chinese preschoolers' social competence and problem behaviours.

Hypothesis 2: Maternal parenting stress (specifically parenting distress and parent–child dysfunctional interaction) will mediate these links.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited from seven kindergartens in Haikou, China—two provincial model schools, two private schools, and three government-subsidized “inclusive” programmes. Mothers of children aged 3–6 years were invited to complete an online questionnaire. After removing 93 questionnaires completed in < 300 s, eight with patterned responses, and one containing a response option selected by only a single respondent, 627 valid records remained (effective response rate = 86 %). These 627 mother–child dyads constituted the final sample. The children included 203 junior-class (32.4 %), 223 middle-class (35.6 %), and 201 senior-class (32.1 %) pupils; 315 were boys and 312 were girls. Maternal age ranged from 20 to > 40 years: 21 mothers were 20–25, 120 were 26–30, 245 were 31–35, 158 were 36–40, and 83 were > 40 years old. Educational attainment was as follows: 16 mothers had completed primary school, 104 secondary school, 272 junior college, 208 undergraduate, and 27 postgraduate study; 80 % of the mothers held a college degree or higher.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Family socioeconomic status (SES)

Following Ren (2010) [26], we used principal-axis factor analysis to construct a family SES index. Eight

indicators—maternal income, paternal income, paternal-grandparent income, maternal-grandparent income, maternal occupation, paternal occupation, maternal education, and paternal education—were entered into the analysis. Two factors with eigenvalues > 1 emerged: “family income” and “family prestige”; together they explained 63.8 % of the variance. After varimax rotation, factor loadings ranged from .607 to .839 (paternal-grandparent income = .839, maternal-grandparent income = .799, paternal income = .683, maternal income = .609, paternal occupation = .770, maternal occupation = .766, paternal education = .678, maternal education = .677). The final SES score was computed as: $SES = (\text{paternal-grandparent income} \times .839 + \text{maternal-grandparent income} \times .799 + \text{paternal income} \times .683 + \text{maternal income} \times .609 + \text{paternal occupation} \times .770 + \text{maternal occupation} \times .766 + \text{paternal education} \times .678 + \text{maternal education} \times .677) / .638$

2.2.2 Maternal parenting stress

The Parenting Stress Index—Short Form (PSI-SF; Abidin, 1995) [27], translated and revised by Geng et al. [28] (full-scale $\alpha = .94$ in Chinese), was administered. The original 36-item inventory contains three subscales: Parenting Distress (PD), Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction (PCDI), and Difficult Child (DC). Because DC reflects child temperament rather than maternal stress per se, we retained the 23 items of PD (10 items) and PCDI (13 items). Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”; higher scores indicate greater stress. Cronbach’s α in the present sample was .902 for the total scale, .869 for PD, and .847 for PCDI.

2.2.3. Social competence and behaviour evaluation (short form)

We used the 30-item Social Competence and Behaviour Evaluation scale (SCBE-30; La Freniere & Jean, 1990) [29], revised for Chinese children by Liu et al. [30]. The instrument yields three factors: Social Competence (SC), Anger-Aggression (externalising problems, EP), and Anxiety-Withdrawal (internalising problems, IP). Items are scored from 1 = “never” to 6 = “always”; higher SC scores indicate better competence, whereas higher EP/IP scores denote more problems. Previous Chinese validation reported factor α coefficients of .66–.81; in the current study $\alpha = .749$ for the full scale, and .819 (SC), .762 (EP), and .800 (IP) for the subscales.

2.3. Procedure

After obtaining kindergarten and parental consent, questionnaires were administered online via Wen-Juan-Xing. Mothers completed all measures in one session ($M = 8.3$ min). Harman’s single-factor test indicated no serious common-method bias (first factor = 20 %).

2.4. Data Analysis

2.4.1 Common-Method Bias Test

Because all data were obtained from maternal self-reports, Harman’s single-factor test [31] was applied to assess potential common-method bias. Seven factors exhibited eigenvalues greater than 1, with the first factor accounting for 20 % of the total variance—well below the 40 % threshold. Thus, no substantial common-method bias was present.

2.4.2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analyses

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations among study variables. Family SES was significantly and negatively correlated with maternal parenting distress (PD), parent–child dysfunctional interaction (PCDI), children’s internalising problems (IP), and externalising problems (EP), whereas it was positively correlated with children’s social competence (SC). In other words, higher SES was associated with lower maternal stress, lower dysfunctional interaction, stronger child social competence, and fewer child problem behaviours.

Both PD and PCDI showed significant negative correlations with SC and significant positive correlations with IP and EP. Specifically, the more distressed or dysregulated the mother reported herself to be, the lower the child’s social competence and the greater the child’s internalising and externalising problems.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among All Variables (N = 627)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.SES	29.4	10.9						
2.Parenting Distress	2.9	0.7	-.332**	—				
3.Parent–Child Dysfunctional Interaction	2.2	0.56	-.304**	.548**	—			
4.Social Competence	3.7	0.6	.187**	-.191**	-.211**	—		
5.Internalizing Problem Behavior	2.3	0.56	-.117**	.288**	.408**	-.245**	—	
6.Externalizing Problem Behavior	2.1	0.49	-.100*	.216**	.318**	-.212**	.495**	—

Note: *** p<0.001 ** p<0.01 *p<0.05,

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Mechanisms Linking Family Socioeconomic Status to Young Children’s Social Competence and Behavior

3.1.1 Mediation Pathways

Building on the significant correlations reported above, we examined whether maternal parenting stress—operationalized as parenting distress (PD) and parent–child dysfunctional interaction (PCDI)—mediates the relations between family SES and each dimension of children’s social functioning (i.e., social competence, internalizing and externalizing problems). Analyses were conducted with the SPSS PROCESS macro. Because the Social Competence and Behavior Evaluation scale contains both adaptive (social competence) and maladaptive (internalizing/externalizing problems) components, we treated each dimension as a sep-



arate dependent variable rather than creating a single composite score. SES served as the independent variable, and PD and PCDI were entered simultaneously as parallel mediators. As shown in Table 2 six mediated pathways emerged. $SES \rightarrow PD \rightarrow$ Social Competence, $SES \rightarrow PCDI \rightarrow$ Social Competence, These two paths were partial mediators: SES retained a significant direct effect after accounting for the mediators. The remaining four paths were full mediators: $SES \rightarrow PD \rightarrow$ Internalizing Problems, $SES \rightarrow PD \rightarrow$ Externalizing Problems, $SES \rightarrow PCDI \rightarrow$ Internalizing Problems, $SES \rightarrow PCDI \rightarrow$ Externalizing Problems. In these four models, the direct effect of SES became nonsignificant once PD or PCDI was included, indicating that maternal parenting stress fully explains the association between SES and child problem behaviors.

3.1.2. Mediation Results

Six mediation paths emerged (Figure 2). For SC, both PD and PCDI were significant partial mediators (indirect effects = 0.048 and 0.052; 25.6 % and 27.6 % of total effects). For IP and EP, PD and PCDI were full mediators; indirect effects accounted for 79.4 % (IP via PD), 68 % (EP via PD), and 96.3 % (EP via PCDI). The direct $SES \rightarrow$ IP/EP paths became non-significant after entering the mediators.

Table 2 Analysis of the Mediating Effects of Maternal Parenting Stress on the Relations between Family SES and Young Children's Social Competence and Problem Behaviors

Path	Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	β	SE	t	95%CI
1	Social competence	SES	0.187	0.002	4.765***	0.006,0.015
	Parenting distress	SES	-0.332	0.003	-0.88***	-0.28,-0.18
	Social competence	SES	0.139	0.002	3.37***	0.003,0.012
	Internalizing problem behavior	Parenting distress	-0.145	0.033	-3.152***	-0.18,-0.05
2	Internalizing problem behavior	SES	-0.117	0.002	-2.94***	-0.01,-0.002
	Externalizing problem behavior	SES	-0.332	0.003	-0.88***	-0.28,-0.18
3	Parenting distress	SES	-0.332	0.003	-0.88***	-0.28,-0.18
	Internalizing problem behavior	SES	-0.024	0.002	-0.59	-0.005,0.003
	Externalizing problem behavior	Parenting distress	-0.28	0.03	6.894***	0.148,0.266
	Parenting distress	SES	-0.1	0.002	-2.514***	-0.008,-0.001
	Internalizing problem behavior	SES	-0.332	0.003	-0.88***	-0.28,-0.18
	Externalizing problem behavior	SES	-0.032	0.002	-0.772	-0.005,0.002
4	Social competence	Parenting distress	0.205	0.027	4.953***	0.08,0.185
	Parent-child dysfunctional interaction	SES	0.187	0.002	4.765***	0.006,0.015
	Internalizing problem behavior	SES	-0.304	0.002	-7.981***	-0.02,-0.12
	Externalizing problem behavior	SES	0.136	0.002	3.331**	-0.268,-0.096
	Parent-child dysfunctional interaction	Parent-child dysfunctional interaction	-0.17	0.044	-4.165***	-0.268,-0.096
	Social competence	Parent-child dysfunctional interaction	-0.17	0.044	-4.165***	-0.268,-0.096
5	Internalizing problem behavior	SES	-0.117	0.002	-2.94***	-0.01,-0.002
	Parent-child dysfunctional interaction	SES	-0.304	0.002	-7.981***	-0.02,-0.12
	Internalizing problem behavior	SES	0.008	0.002	0.206	-0.03,0.04
	Externalizing problem behavior	Parent-child dysfunctional interaction	0.411	0.038	10.703***	0.335,0.485
	Parent-child dysfunctional interaction	SES	-0.1	0.002	-2.514***	-0.008,-0.001
	Social competence	SES	-0.304	0.002	-7.981***	-0.02,-0.12
6	Internalizing problem behavior	SES	-0.004	0.002	-0.089	-0.04,0.003
	Externalizing problem behavior	Parent-child dysfunctional interaction	0.317	0.035	7.965***	0.208,0.344
	Parent-child dysfunctional interaction	Parent-child dysfunctional interaction	0.317	0.035	7.965***	0.208,0.344

4. Conclusions

4.1 Overall Profiles of Family SES, Maternal Parenting Stress, and Children's Social Competence and Behaviour

4.2 Family Socioeconomic Status Influences Children's Social Competence and Behaviour through Maternal Parenting Stress

The results demonstrate that both parenting distress and parent–child dysfunctional interaction mediate the relations between family SES and young children's social-emotional development. Children from higher-SES families experience lower maternal parenting stress, display stronger social competence, and exhibit fewer internalising and externalising problems. Importantly, parenting distress and dysfunctional interaction fully mediate the paths linking SES to child problem behaviours: once these stress dimensions are accounted for, the direct effects of SES on internalising and externalising problems become non-significant. This indicates that the emotional strain and interactional difficulties experienced by mothers completely transmit the influence of socioeconomic disadvantage to children's aggression, anger, defensiveness, shyness/withdrawal, and other internalising/externalising symptoms. These findings align with previous work by Berkowitz and Conger et al. [33,17] and confirm Hypothesis 2 of the present study. Interventions that ameliorate maternal emotional distress, augment parenting knowledge, and enhance the quality of parent–child interactions may therefore offset the developmental risks associated with low SES.

4.3 Limitations and Future Directions

Although the study clarifies how SES shapes young children's social development via maternal parenting stress, several limitations should be noted. First, the sample was drawn primarily from urban kindergartens; future research should include rural and socio-economically more diverse populations. Second, all measures of children's social competence and behaviour relied on maternal reports, which may be subject to reporter bias. Subsequent studies would benefit from multi-informant assessments (e.g., combining mother and teacher ratings) to enhance objectivity.

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