

ARAB YOUTHS' EXPECTATIONS OF PARENTS AND PERCEPTIONS OF CHILD NEGLECT

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Abstract

Neglect of children and youth by their parents severely affects children's development. Unfortunately, literature on child neglect focuses on professional discourse while rarely examining the views of children and youth themselves. This lacuna is interwoven with the broader issue of children's expectations of their parents, which are also scarcely studied. This study aims to gain a more nuanced understanding of youth life experiences, focusing on two related and complementary issues: their expectations of parents and their perceptions of child neglect. The study employed a qualitative paradigm focusing on the meanings and interpretation of social phenomena and social processes in context. Data were gathered via focus group discussions from a total of 31 youth, through purposive sampling according to age (13 and 14) and ethnic affiliation (Muslim Arabs in northern Israel), and thematically analyzed.

The data analysis showed that youth expectations of their parents reflect their perceptions of neglect. Four themes arose: emotional wellbeing, responsibility and supervision, guidance and companionship, and providing material needs. The findings highlight the need to include voices representing diverse groups in the population, as part of context-informed perception in discourses of parenting and child neglect. These voices provide a platform for examining the complexity inherent in negotiating neglect in the unique context of youth, and the importance of recognizing their unique perceptions. The voices raised the importance of emotional and psychological needs for the youths' wellbeing and development to a greater extent than material and physical needs.

Keywords: *Parenting, child neglect, context-informed perception, Arab youths' expectations, emotional and material needs.*

1. Introduction

Parents play a major role in the lives of their children, including meeting basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, protection, and security, but also other emotional and developmental needs (Asija, 2015). Warm parenting is seen as the key to the healthy and thriving development of adolescents across various well-being domains (Ulferts, 2020). Therefore, the neglect of children by their parents is considered to have severe implications for children's wellbeing, development, social skills, and achievements, as well as affecting physical and mental health during the child's life span (Turner et al., 2019).

Parents aim to promote and support the physical, social, emotional, economic, and intellectual development of a child from infancy to adulthood (Asija, 2015). They are expected to be responsible for raising a child who utilizes his or her full potential as an individual. There is a lack of consensus in the literature on what is expected from parents and particularly an assessment of strengths in a parenting capacity.

Despite the importance of the issue of child neglect, there is a scarcity of scholarly literature aimed at understanding, preventing, and intervening with child neglect (Elias et al., 2018). Child neglect generally includes a lack of parental supervision, protection, and provision of basic needs such as nutrition, medical care, clothing, shelter, and education. Neglect may be physical, medical, educational, emotional (which includes a lack of affection and empathy), environmental, and supervisory (Julien et al., 2019; Morrongiello & Cox, 2020).

One angle from which the phenomena of child neglect have hardly been examined is the perspectives of children and youth themselves. Due to the growing emphasis in recent years on children's rights, their inclusion in social studies has become critical.

This study focuses on the context of the Muslim Arab society in Israel. The Arab society is the largest native minority group in Israel, constituting 21 percent of the entire Israeli population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Over the past three decades, the family structure and the perceptions of its members are in the process of changing at various levels, including parent-child relationships. The rapid changes create, in many cases, gaps between parents and their children, resulting in family conflicts and a lack of supervision, thereby putting children and youth at higher risk for behavioral problems.

The current study aims to gain a better and more nuanced understanding of youth life experiences, focusing on their expectations of parents and perceptions of child neglect in the context of Arab Muslim society. It addresses the following two research questions: What are the Muslim Arab youths' expectations from their parents? How do Muslim Arab youth perceive and define child neglect?

2. Materials and methods

This paper is based on a qualitative study that involved six focus group discussions from a total of 31 Muslim Arab youth, aged 13 and 14 who live in the northern part of Israel. Each discussion lasted one to two hours and began with a brief explanation of the study. Later, vignettes were presented describing various states of neglect such as education and health. Participants were invited to share their perceptions of the situations and offer suggestions for intervention.

As part of the qualitative analysis, the focus group discussions were audiotaped, fully transcribed verbatim, and anonymized. The texts were read and re-read several times. They were then coded according to recurrent themes, which were mapped according to methodically identified interconnections and emerging patterns (Patton, 2015).

3. Findings

The qualitative analysis of the focus groups' discussions yielded four main themes about neglect and expectations of parents: emotional wellbeing, responsibility and supervision, guidance and companionship, and providing material needs.

3.1. Emotional wellbeing

All the youth emphasized parental love, warmth, and affection as key characteristics of the relationships between parents and their children, with one saying, "Parents need to give their children warmth and love." They further noted the importance of parental care: "A good parent is someone who takes care of me and asks how I'm doing 24 hours a day."

The youths viewed a lack of love, warmth, trust, concern, and care as neglectful parenting: "My mother's love is gone. She gave birth to seven children and has to divide the love between them, and you only have a small part left."

3.2. Responsibility and supervision

Participants stressed their expectations that parents should be responsible: "If you bring children into the world, you have a responsibility." They expect parents to be involved in their children's social life and get to know their friends. It seems that parental monitoring and supervision provide the youths with a sense of safety, "My parent should know where I am going to and coming from."

A neglectful parent was also described as a parent who does not take the parenting role seriously even when the teachers try to involve them, thereby failing to meet their responsibilities for youth education: "If the youths have a test, and they study for it, but the parents do not help them."

3.3. Guidance and companionship

The need for guidance, companionship, and direction from the parents stood out in the various focus groups. One participant stressed this need, saying, "Parents are supposed to teach their children everything about life." There is also the need to provide knowledge, experiences, explanations, and conversations about right and wrong: "Parents need to explain everything to their children and educate them for the rest of their lives. They need to guide them and raise their awareness of what is happening in life."

3.4. Providing material needs

Some of the youths talked about their expectations of material goods they request from their parents, such as money, gifts, treats, and vacations. One participant said, "Parents should give children out-of-pocket expenses and surprises. If they [the youths] ask for phone or clothes, for example, the

parents should give them.” Nonetheless, most of the study participants addressed the importance of food preparation and explained that mothers are expected to cook for their children, “A good mother should always cook for her children what they like to eat.” At the same time, from the youth perspective, a parent who does not provide food for his children is considered a neglectful parent. One participant said, “Neglectful parents do not prepare food and do not take care of the children”.

In the youths’ descriptions of neglectful parents, there was a reference to a wider range of unmet needs than in the description of their expectations of parents. One youth mentioned the basic need for a roof over their heads, “Some people have no food. They have to thank God that their parents did not throw them on the street.”

The findings highlight the youths’ expectation of material giving from their parents, taking into account the financial situation of the family. They stressed the need for a meal and a shelter that would protect them, so their absence was considered parental neglect.

4. Discussion

The study attempted to gain a better and more nuanced understanding of children and youth life experiences, focusing on their expectations of parents and their perceptions of child neglect in the context of Muslim Arab society in Israel.

Compared to the research literature (Julien et al., 2019), the youth voices in the present study raised many different aspects, mainly emphasizing the parent’s exclusive responsibility, particularly emotionally. They gave special importance to the quality of parent-child relationships and indicated that the emotions of love, warmth, support, respect, trust, and caring are essential and basic emotions, thus their absence was considered in their view as neglect.

The youths reported that neglectful parents do not show interest in their children and do not trust them. Also, they make no effort to monitor them or protect them from the many risks around them. Participants in the present study addressed the parent’s insensitivity to their emotional and physical needs and the parent’s preoccupation with his or her personal needs as contributing factors to child neglect. This finding is particularly important because, in the research literature, neglect refers to much more basic and minimal definitions; identifying physical, emotional, educational, and medical neglect (Julien et al., 2019).

Moreover, the findings emphasized the central place of the family in building the youths’ identity and the youths’ need for security and parental involvement, and supervision in their social relationships. This expectation coming from the study participants might reflect the accepted belief that Arab parents are extensively involved and responsible for the upbringing and behavior of their children (Dwairy & Achoui, 2006).

The findings in this study contribute to the conceptualization of neglect as a multifaceted social problem. The youths raised the importance of emotional and psychological needs to a greater extent than material and physical needs. The findings underscore the importance of positive interactions and dynamics between parents and their children, and the importance of paying attention to protective factors (e.g., parental love, support, and involvement) that can help youth in situations of neglect. Thus, as professionals, it is important to encourage parents to express love and show warmth to their children.

The study also highlights that intervention and prevention programs for child neglect should emphasize the positive sides and strengths of the parents in their relationships with their children, avoiding a focus on shortcomings that may foster negative attitudes among caregivers. Furthermore, emotional support might be present and provide a source of strength also in houses where physical or other types of neglect are more likely, and it seems to matter a great deal for children’s wellbeing.

Protecting the wellbeing and safety of children should be the responsibility of society. Therefore, the awareness, supervision, and involvement of the public about neglect and its consequences should be raised through increased publicity and various media about existing services such as helplines, child protection institutions, and organizations as well as Internet sites dealing with the issue of neglect, in a manner adapted to the language of the target population. It is important to provide the public with explanations of how to identify child neglect and to whom to report if needed. In some cases, the involvement of informal factors such as friends, family, community, and religious leaders should be encouraged when other programs working directly with the family have not helped.

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