

A Study to Explore the Lived Experiences of the Only Child Adolescent in Selected Communities of Thrissur District

Tissy Thomas¹, Aleena Lis Mariya²

¹Pynadath house Karukutty, Eernakulam dist, Kerala, India
Email: tissyandrin@gmail.com

²St James College of Nursing, Chalakudy, Thrissure, Kerala, India
Email: [St.jamesnsgcollege\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:St.jamesnsgcollege[at]gmail.com)

Abstract: Adolescence is a critical developmental stage marked by identity formation, emotional growth, and the development of social relationships. For only child adolescents those without siblings this period may present unique psychosocial challenges. The absence of sibling interactions can influence coping mechanisms, socialization, and emotional well-being. Research suggests that although only children spend more time alone, they do not necessarily feel lonelier; instead, they adopt distinct strategies to manage solitude and peer relationships. **Objective:** The objective of the study was to explore the lived experiences of only child adolescent. **Method:** A qualitative phenomenological approach was adopted. Using purposive and snowball sampling, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 only child adolescents aged 10–21. The semi structured interview method was used to collect socio-demographic data, and interviews were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework. **Result:** Among participants, 57.14% were aged 18–19 years, 78.57% were females, and 92.85% were currently studying. Half of the fathers had secondary education, and 62.28% of mothers were graduates or higher. Most participants (78.57%) lived in rural areas and were from Hindu backgrounds (71.42%). Six major themes emerged: parental relationship, expression and autonomy, role expectations, emotional challenges, coping mechanisms, social connectivity, and benefits of being an only child. Participants described strong parental bonds but limited autonomy, faced loneliness and societal pressure, and coped through parental support, peers, and extended family. **Conclusion:** Only child adolescents experience emotional closeness and social expectations but show resilience and develop adaptive coping strategies, highlighting the importance of supportive parenting and community awareness.

Keywords: Phenomenology; Only Child Adolescents; Lived Experiences; Parental Relationship; Emotional Challenges; Social Connectivity; Role Expectations; Coping Mechanisms; Autonomy; Family Dynamics

1. Introduction

"The more you know yourself, the more patience you have for what you see in others." (Erik H. Erikson)

Background of the Problem

The period of adolescence, typically ranging from 10 to 21 years, is a crucial developmental stage characterized by rapid physical, emotional, psychological, and social changes.¹ Adolescence marks the transition from childhood to adulthood and is often accompanied by identity exploration, a growing desire for autonomy, and the need for social acceptance. In India, adolescents account for nearly one-fifth of the total population, making them a significant demographic group with unique developmental needs and challenges. This stage, while full of potential, is also one of the most vulnerable.

Need And Significance of the Study

An only child adolescent refers to an adolescent who is the only child in their family, without siblings. This unique family dynamic can influence the child's development, personality, and relationships. In the UK, families with only one child accounted for 44% (3.6 million) in 2022, up from

40% in 2017. Similarly, in Canada, the number of one-child families rose from 37% in 2001 to 45% in 2021.

Statement of the Problem

A study to explore the lived experiences of the only child adolescent in selected communities of Thrissur district.

Objectives of the Study

To explore the lived experiences of the only child adolescent.

Operational Definition

- **Only child adolescent:** refers to an individual between 10 and 21 years old who has no brothers or sisters at all, not by birth, adoption or through marriage.
- **Lived experience:** refers to the personal, social, emotional situations and challenges faced by only child adolescent in their daily lives.

2. Conceptual Frame Work

This study is guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which provides a comprehensive framework to understand how an adolescent's experiences are shaped by their interactions within a series of nested environmental systems.

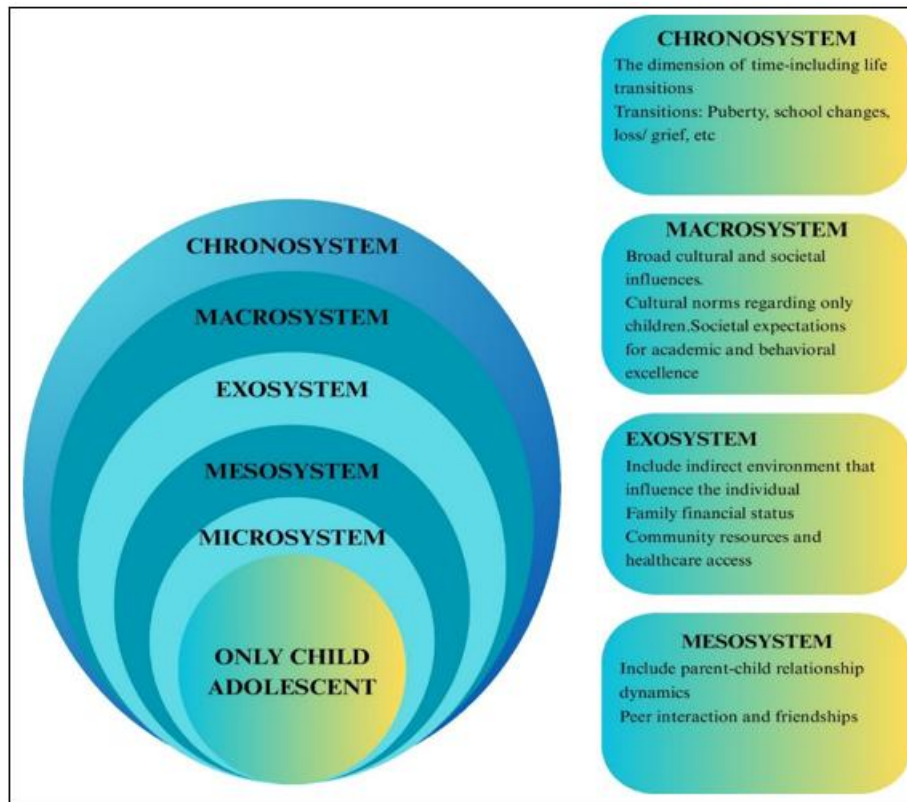


Figure 1.1: Schematic representation of conceptual frame work

3. Review of Literature

Research studies related to psychological factors of only child adolescent

Jinlong He et.al. (2025) conducted a cross sectional study on “The impact of only child status on adolescent mental health: a multicenter cross-sectional study using propensity score matching in Western China. A multi-center cluster sampling approach included 7,359 students from 33 middle schools in

Western China. Only child adolescents showed significantly lower levels of depression, stress, emotional neglect, and negative affect. In the GLM analysis, after adjusting for neglect, no significant associations were observed (all $p > 0.05$). However, post adjustments for psychological abuse, the only-child group also recorded lower scores in depression, stress, and negative affect¹³

4. Research Methodology

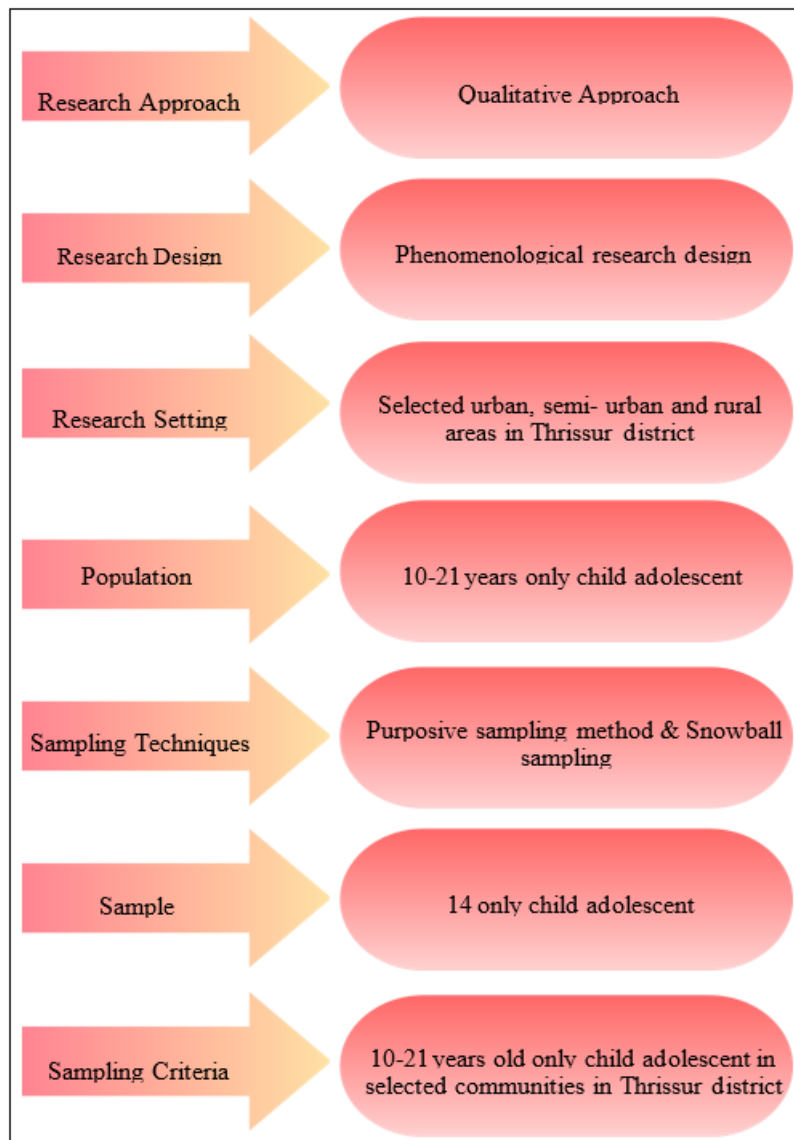


Figure 3.1: Schematic representation of research methodology

5. Discussion

Discussion refers to whether the research findings or study report differs from previous literature.

The findings of the study are discussed and organized under the following headings:

Section 1: Discussion related baseline variables of only child adolescent children

Section 2: Discussion related to the lived experience of only child adolescent children.

Discussion Related to Baseline variables of only child adolescent

The current exploratory study aimed to understand the lived experience of only child adolescent children, with an emphasis on their baseline demographic and socioeconomic characteristics.

According to the area of residence, a large proportion of participants (80%) resided in rural areas, while only 20% lived in urban areas.

Religious affiliation among participants was predominantly Christian (80%), followed by Hindu (20%), with no Muslim participants.

With regard to family structure, the majority (90%) belonged to nuclear families, while 10% were from joint families.

In terms of educational qualifications, 50% of participants were professionals, 40% were graduates, and 10% held doctoral degrees.

Occupational status revealed that 70% of participants were employed as professionals, while 30% were unemployed.

Regarding economic background, 30% of participants reported a monthly income between ₹21,807 and ₹32,711, while another 30% earned less than ₹6,544 per month. Additionally, 20% earned between ₹43,615 and ₹88,192, and another 20% reported income between ₹32,712 and ₹43,614.

Concerning the duration of singlehood, 50% of participants had been single for 1–3 years, 30% for 3–5 years, and 20% for more than 5 years.

Discussion related to the lived experiences of only child adolescent

The purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of only child adolescent. After data analysis six themes were emerged which include:

- 1) Parental relationship
- 2) Expression and autonomy
- 3) Role expectation
- 4) Emotional challenges and coping mechanism
- 5) Social connectivity and perception
- 6) Benefits of being an only child

The first theme was “**Parental Relationship**”, the majority of participants (71.4%) reported a strong emotional closeness with their parents, especially with their mothers, citing them as their primary source of support, comfort, and companionship in the absence of siblings. Overall, the findings suggest that only-child adolescents in the selected communities of Thrissur experience deeply connected, emotionally nurturing, but often over-involved parental relationships, which, while offering a strong support system, may also hinder the development of independence.

The second theme was: “**Expression and Autonomy**”, it was observed that a significant number of participants (6 out of 14; 42.8%) felt they had limited decision-making freedom, particularly in major life areas like academics and career choices. Participants 2, 4, 8, 11, 12, and 13 reported that their parents largely influenced or directly made decisions for them, often citing their status as the only child as a reason for this control. Some participants, such as Participant 13, accepted this lack of autonomy, trusting their parents’ intentions, while others initially disagreed but eventually conformed. On the other hand, 3 participants (Participants 9, 10, and 14; 21.4%) expressed that they were granted more freedom and autonomy in decision-making, with their parents actively encouraging them to make independent choices or respecting their preferences. These findings suggest that while only children generally enjoy strong communicative relationships with their parents, a notable portion experience restricted autonomy, especially in crucial life decisions. The combination of high responsiveness to needs with limited decision-making power points toward a protective but potentially controlling parenting dynamic, which may affect the child’s development of independence and self-determination.

The third theme was: “**Role Expectation**”, a considerable number of participants (6 out of 14; 42.8%) reported experiencing explicit expectations from elders regarding their role as the only child, particularly in terms of caring for parents, maintaining family reputation, and upholding responsibility. These expectations were often communicated through advice or comments such as “you are the only hope” or “you must bring pride to the family

The fourth theme was: “**Emotional Challenges and Coping Mechanism**”, a significant number of participants (8 out of 14; 57.1%) reported experiencing feelings of loneliness, particularly when left alone at home or in situations where they observed others sharing bonds with siblings. Many (e.g., Participants 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, and 10) described moments of emotional void, wishing for someone to confide in or share their everyday experiences, especially during times when their

parents were unavailable. Participants 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 13, and 14 shared experiences of crying in solitude, reacting strongly to perceived emotional neglect, or displaying possessive behaviors toward loved ones, often attributing these emotions to their status as an only child. Despite this, many exhibit strong coping mechanisms through supportive relationships and personal growth efforts, reflecting resilience and adaptability in navigating the unique emotional landscape of being an only child.

The fifth theme was: “**Social Connectivity and Perception**”, a large portion of participants (9 out of 14; 64.2%) reported experiencing societal stereotypes and judgment related to being an only child. These stereotypes included being labeled as spoiled, selfish, stubborn, or emotionally fragile. Many participants (e.g., Participants 1, 3, 4, 5, and 13) expressed distress over such perceptions, stating that these labels often led to feelings of being misunderstood, unfairly judged, or even targeted by others including teachers and relatives. A few participants also mentioned efforts to improve their social engagement through college or by gradually overcoming introversion. Overall, the findings reveal that while societal stereotypes about only children persist and can negatively impact self-image and social confidence, many adolescents actively resist or challenge these perceptions. Social adaptability among only children varies widely some struggle with trust and social anxiety, while others are naturally outgoing and socially capable.

This indicates that the social experiences of only children are diverse and shaped more by personal temperament and environment than by the mere fact of being an only child.

The sixth theme was: “**Benefits of being an only child**” focuses on the benefits experienced by only child adolescents, particularly the individual attention they receive from their parents. This sub theme was expressed by 9 out of 14 participants (64.3%), who consistently described how being the sole child in the family allowed them to enjoy undivided love, care, and support. While many acknowledged that being an only child could sometimes bring loneliness, they also felt that the level of attention and care they received helped mitigate such feelings. Overall, the narratives reflect that only children often perceive their experience positively, with exclusive parental attention contributing significantly to their emotional well-being, sense of security, and confidence.

Findings related to Baseline variable of only child adolescent.

There were 14 subjects recruited for the qualitative study, among which the majority (57.14%) belonged to the age group of 18–19 years, while 14.28% each were from the age groups 10–14, 15–17, and 20–21 years. According to sex, 78.57% were females and 21.42% were males; none identified as others or preferred not to disclose their gender. In terms of educational status, the majority (92.85%) were currently studying, and 7.14% had completed their schooling. With respect to academic level, 14.28% of participants were studying in 4th–8th standard, 35.71% in 11th–12th standard, and 50% were pursuing graduation or higher education. Regarding their father’s education, 7.14% had no formal education, 14.28% had completed primary education, 50% had completed secondary education, and 28.57% had attained

graduation and above. In terms of mother's education, 35.71% had completed secondary education and 64.28% had completed graduation or higher. Most participants (78.57%) belonged to rural areas, while 21.42% were from urban areas. In terms of religion, 71.42% were Hindus and 28.57% were Christians. Regarding community, 50% of the participants were from the General category, 35.71% from Scheduled Castes (SC), and 14.28% from Other Backward Classes (OBC). In academic performance, 57.14% rated themselves as good, 35.71% as average, and 7.14% as excellent. With respect to monthly family income, 42.87% belonged to families earning more than ₹20,000, while 28.57% each had a monthly income between ₹5,000–10,000 and ₹10,000–20,000. None of the participants reported a monthly income less than ₹5,000.

Findings of the Semi structured interview to explore the lived experiences of only child adolescent

During the semi structured interview, the main themes arisen include, 1: Parental relationship, 2: Expression and autonomy, 3: Role expectation, 4: Emotional challenges and coping mechanism, 5: Social connectivity and perception, 6: Benefits of being an only child⁴⁶.

6. Limitations

- 1) As a qualitative study, findings are context specific and not generalizable to all only child adolescents.
- 2) Self-reported data may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability.
- 3) The sample may lack representation from rural or low income backgrounds.
- 4) The study may not capture experiences across the entire adolescent age range if limited to a specific group.

7. Recommendations

- 1) Conduct a comparative study between only child adolescents and those with siblings to explore differences in emotional development, coping mechanisms, and family interactions.
- 2) Explore the experiences of only children in various cultural and socioeconomic contexts.
- 3) Develop interventions and mental health frameworks specifically tailored for only child adolescents and evaluate their effectiveness through mixed methods research

References

- [1] Patton GC, Sawyer SM, Santelli JS, Ross DA, Afifi R, Allen NB, et al. Our future: a Lancet commission on adolescent health and wellbeing. *Lancet*. 2016;387(10036):2423–78. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(16)00579-1.
- [2] Times of India. Stress and emotional distress among Indian adolescents: A growing concern. The Times of India. 2024.
- [3] Falbo T, Polit DF. Quantitative review of the only child literature: Research evidence and theory development. *Psychol Bull*. 1986;100(2):176–89. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.100.2.176.
- [4] National Institute for Urban and Social Studies (NIUSSP). The changing family dynamics in India: Nuclear families and only-children. NIUSSP Report. 2021
- [5] Census of India. Literacy rates and population demographics in Thrissur district. Census of India 2011
- [6] He J, Zhong Y, Song Y, Luo J, Lin C, Wu Y, et al. The impact of only-child status on adolescent mental health: a multi-center cross-sectional study using propensity score matching in Western China. *BMC Public Health*. 2025 Jun 7;25(1).
- [7] Ghosh P, Kumar R. Adolescence in India: Pressures, challenges, and opportunities. *Indian J Pediatric*. 2020;87(4):321-8.
- [8] Lin S, Chen L. Social relationships and emotional well-being among only-child adolescents in Taiwan. *Asian J Psychol*. 2019;13(4):202-16.