

A Comparative Study of Parent-Child Relationship and Child Mental Development in Kerala: Families with Both Parents Working versus Families with One Parent Working

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Abstract: *The present study examined parent-child relationship and selected indicators of child mental development in Kerala by comparing families in which both parents were employed with families in which one parent was employed. The study focused on children aged 5–10 years and assessed emotional expression, comfort in sharing problems, peer interaction, behavioural difficulties, academic performance, emotional recovery, conflict handling, social participation, empathy, parental time and caregiving characteristics. The supplied survey dataset contained 134 raw responses. After consent and eligibility screening, 109 responses were eligible; seven eligible responses reporting unemployment were excluded from the planned two-group comparison, leaving 102 cases (61 both-parents-employed; 41 one parent-employed). Descriptive statistics were used for participant characteristics and child development indicators. Chi-square tests were used for categorical comparisons, and a Mann-Whitney U test was used for a researcher-developed composite indicator based on 14 coded questionnaire indicators. The composite did not differ significantly between groups ($U = 1314.0$, $p = .666$). Number of children in the family ($p = .004$) and empathy ($p = .041$) showed nominally significant group associations. These findings require cautious interpretation because the study used an online/convenience sample, a researcher developed questionnaire, parent/guardian reports, and multiple individual comparisons. Overall, the data do not demonstrate a statistically significant difference in the overall set of measured developmental indicators by parental employment category.*

Keywords: parent-child relationship; parental employment; child development; Kerala; caregiving; emotional development; social development

1. Introduction

The parent-child relationship is a central context for children's emotional, social and cognitive development. During middle childhood, children increasingly develop emotional regulation, social competence, problem-solving abilities, academic habits and independence. Parents contribute to these processes through emotional responsiveness, communication, supervision, shared routines and support for learning.

Parental employment can change the amount and timing of family interaction, but employment status alone does not necessarily determine the quality of parent-child relationships. Bianchi (2000) reported that increases in maternal employment do not necessarily translate into proportional reductions in time with children because families reorganize their routines. Brooks-Gunn, Han, and Waldfogel (2010) similarly emphasized that child-development outcomes can depend on the timing and circumstances of employment rather than employment status alone.

Emotional self-regulation and social functioning are also shaped by broader sociocultural and socioeconomic contexts (Raver, 2004). Family structure, substitute caregiving, routines and the quality of interaction may therefore be important when considering how employment patterns relate to children's experiences. The present study addresses this issue in a Kerala sample by comparing families with both parents working and families with one parent working.

1.1 Need for the Study

A Kerala-specific comparison is useful because family systems, extended-family support and cultural expectations may shape parent-child interaction differently across settings. The present survey also provides an opportunity to examine actual parent-reported responses rather than assuming that a particular employment arrangement necessarily produces better or poorer child outcomes.

1.2 Objectives

- To compare selected indicators of child mental development between families in which both parents are employed and families in which one parent is employed.
- To examine the nature of the parent-child relationship in the two employment groups.
- To assess differences in emotional expression, problem sharing and peer interaction.
- To compare behavioural, academic and social-development indicators across the two groups.
- To examine the role of parental time, caregiving arrangements and family structure in the observed responses.
- To determine whether the overall researcher-developed development indicator differs between the two parental employment groups.

1.3 Research Questions

- Do selected child mental-development indicators differ between children from both-parents-employed and one-parent-employed families?
- Does parental employment status differ in its association with emotional expression, problem sharing and peer interaction?
- Are academic, behavioural and social indicators different between the two groups?
- Does the overall researcher-developed development indicator differ between the two groups?

2. Review of Literature

Parent-child relationships involve warmth, responsiveness, communication, monitoring, guidance and shared activities. Such relationships provide an important context for children's emotional security and social competence. The literature on parental employment indicates that family time and child outcomes are influenced by how families organize work and caregiving rather than by employment category alone (Bianchi, 2000; Brooks-Gunn et al., 2010).

Emotional and social development include children's ability to express feelings, communicate problems, interact with peers, participate socially, manage conflict and respond empathically. Raver (2004) highlighted the importance of emotional self-regulation within sociocultural and socioeconomic contexts. Family and caregiving arrangements may therefore interact with employment patterns in ways that cannot be captured by a simple employed/not-employed distinction.

The present study extends these ideas to a Kerala-based parent-reported survey of children aged 5–10 years. The study combines indicators of parent-child interaction with emotional, social, behavioural and academic indicators. Because the questionnaire was researcher developed rather than a standardized psychological assessment, the findings are interpreted as survey-based developmental indicators rather than diagnostic evidence.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A quantitative, comparative, cross-sectional survey design was used. The design compared two naturally occurring parental-employment groups at one point in time. Because the study was non-experimental, observed group differences or associations cannot be interpreted as evidence that parental employment caused any child outcome.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The supplied dataset contained 134 raw survey records. There were 128 recorded consent responses of "Yes", five "No" responses and one blank response. Of the eligibility responses, 109 were "Yes", 19 were "No" and six were blank. After retaining responses with both consent and eligibility recorded as "Yes", 109 responses remained. Seven eligible responses classified as unemployed were excluded from the

intended two-group comparison, resulting in 102 participants: 61 in the both-parents-employed group and 41 in the one-parent employed group.

Group	n	%
Both parents employed	61	59.8
One parent employed	41	40.2
Total	102	100

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

- Recorded consent to participate.
- Recorded eligibility for the stated child-age category.
- Reported employment status permitting classification into the two comparison groups.
- Parent/guardian responses concerning a child aged 5–10 years.

3.4 Research Instrument

The researcher-developed questionnaire contained demographic and family questions followed by parent-reported indicators of parent-child interaction and child development. Domains included gender, relationship to child, number of children, employment status, primary caregiver, family system, time spent with the child, emotional expression, problem sharing, peer interaction, behavioural problems, family meals, academic support, academic performance, creativity, quality-time satisfaction, perceived employment impact, support needs, emotional recovery, separation worry, conflict handling, social participation and empathy.

A descriptive development-indicator index was created by coding 14 questionnaire indicators onto ordered numerical values and calculating their mean. It was used only for this dataset and was not treated as a validated psychological scale.

3.5 Data Collection and Analysis

Responses were collected electronically through a structured survey. Consent and eligibility were reviewed before analysis, employment groups were formed, and categorical responses were summarized using frequencies and percentages. Chi-square tests of independence were used for categorical comparisons, with Cramér's V as the effect-size measure. The researcher-developed composite indicator was compared between groups using the Mann-Whitney U test because the underlying variables were primarily ordinal and the composite was not a validated interval scale.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Participation was based on recorded survey consent. Individual identities are not presented, and results are reported at group level. The study did not diagnose mental or developmental disorders. The supplied research project did not provide a separate institutional ethical approval statement; therefore, no such approval is claimed in this manuscript.

4. Results

4.1 Participant and Family Characteristics

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Child gender	Female	58	56.9
Child gender	Male	44	43.1
Respondent	Mother	75	73.5
Respondent	Father	24	23.5
Respondent	Guardian	3	2.9
Family system	Nuclear	76	74.5
Family system	Joint/extended	24	23.5
Family system	Single parent	2	2
Children in family	Single child	38	37.3
Children in family	2 children	55	53.9
Children in family	3 or more	9	8.8

The final sample consisted of 58 female and 44 male children. Mothers were the most common respondents. Nuclear families formed the majority of the sample. The number of children in the family differed significantly between the employment groups, $\chi^2(2) = 10.878$, $p = .004$, Cramér's $V = .327$.

4.2 Caregiving and Parent–Child Interaction

Indicator	Main descriptive result
Daily time with child	More than 4 hours: 55 (53.9%)
Primary caregiver in respondent's absence	Mother: 39 (38.2%); grandparents/relatives: 30 (29.4%); father: 29 (28.4%)
Emotional expression	Very often: 68 (66.7%)
Problem sharing	Very comfortable/comfortable: 92 (90.2%)
Peer interaction	Well/very well: 71 (69.6%)
Behavioural problems	Never/rarely: 82 (80.4%)
Quality-time satisfaction	Satisfied/very satisfied: 84 (82.4%)

4.3 Academic, Social and Emotional Indicators

Indicator	Main result	Group comparison p
Academic performance	Good/excellent: 87 (85.3%)	0.738
Parental academic help	Frequently: 46 (45.1%); sometimes: 37 (36.3%)	—
Creativity/innovation	Yes: 95 (93.1%)	—
Emotional recovery	Immediate: 66 (64.7%)	0.767
Separation worry	Slight/moderate: 80 (78.4%)	0.392
Conflict handling	Good/excellent: 63 (61.8%)	0.774
Social participation	Yes: 91 (89.2%)	—
Empathy	Very/reasonably empathetic: 88 (86.3%)	0.041

4.5 Comparison Between Employment Groups

Variable	χ^2 / U	df	p	Cramér's V / interpretation
Child gender	2.418	1	0.12	.154; not significant
Daily time with child	4.399	3	0.221	.208; not significant
Emotional expression	1.554	3	0.67	.123; not significant
Problem sharing	3.528	3	0.317	.186; not significant
Peer interaction	4.593	4	0.332	.212; not significant
Behavioural problems	0.893	2	0.64	.094; not significant
Academic performance	1.261	3	0.738	.111; not significant

Quality-time satisfaction	1.49	4	0.828	.121; not significant
Emotional recovery	0.531	2	0.767	.072; not significant
Separation worry	2.996	3	0.392	.171; not significant
Conflict handling	0.513	2	0.774	.071; not significant
Empathy	9.984	4	0.041	.313; nominally significant
Development indicator	U = 1314.0	-	0.666	Not significant

4.6 Researcher-Developed Development Indicator

Group	n	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Both parents employed	61	2.778	0.295	2	3.429
One parent employed	41	2.76	0.309	2.071	3.571

The Mann–Whitney U test showed no statistically significant difference in the overall researcher-developed development indicator between the two employment groups ($U = 1314.0$, $p = .666$). The close group means should be interpreted descriptively because the index was created from researcher-developed ordinal and binary indicators.

5. Discussion

The central finding was that the overall researcher-developed development indicator did not differ significantly between families with both parents employed and families with one parent employed. This finding is consistent with a contextual interpretation of parental employment in which employment status alone may not determine children's developmental experiences. Previous literature similarly indicates that family routines and time organization can mediate the relationship between employment and child outcomes (Bianchi, 2000; Brooks-Gunn et al., 2010).

The descriptive findings were generally positive across both groups. Emotional expression, problem sharing, peer interaction, academic performance and social participation were commonly reported in positive categories. Emotional expression did not differ significantly between groups ($p = .670$), and problem sharing did not differ significantly ($p = .317$). Peer interaction also showed no statistically significant group difference ($p = .332$).

Daily time with the child showed a descriptive difference: 63.4% of the one-parent-employed group reported more than four hours per day compared with 47.5% of the both-parents-employed group. However, the overall distribution was not statistically significant ($p = .221$).

Thus, the observed percentage difference should not be treated as evidence that one employment arrangement causes greater parental involvement.

Family composition differed significantly between employment groups ($p = .004$). This finding is important because family size can influence caregiving distribution, parental time and children's social experiences. It suggests that family structure should be considered when interpreting employment-related comparisons rather than treating employment status as an isolated explanatory variable.

Empathy showed a nominally significant association with employment group ($p = .041$, $V = .313$). A larger proportion of children in the one-parent-employed group were classified as very empathetic. However, the empathy item was part of a researcher-developed questionnaire and multiple outcomes were tested. The finding should therefore be regarded as exploratory and should be replicated using validated measures.

The study also found that 63.7% of respondents indicated that they would like support in balancing work and parenting. This does not establish child mental-health impairment; rather, it indicates that practical work–family support may be valued even when parents report generally positive child functioning.

6. Limitations

- The study used an online/convenience sample, limiting generalizability.
- The questionnaire was researcher-developed and was not a validated clinical or developmental measure.
- Child-development indicators were based on parent/guardian reports; teacher, child and clinician reports were unavailable.
- The cross-sectional design does not establish causal relationships.
- The supplied dataset did not contain a clean age variable despite the stated eligibility criteria.
- Several employment and family-context categories were combined for the main comparison.
- Multiple individual statistical comparisons were conducted, so nominal p -values should be interpreted cautiously.
- The dataset did not directly measure parental work hours, commuting time, parental stress, income or workplace flexibility.

7. Conclusion

Within this sample, parental employment category was not associated with a statistically significant difference in the overall researcher-developed set of child-development indicators.

Children in both groups were generally reported to show positive emotional communication, social participation, academic functioning and behavioural adjustment. The findings instead highlight the importance of considering family size, caregiving arrangements, time availability and the quality of parent–child interaction alongside employment status.

The conclusions are limited to the sample and questionnaire used. They should not be interpreted as evidence that parental employment has no effect on child mental health. Future studies using larger and more representative Kerala samples, validated psychological measures, multiple informants and longitudinal designs would provide stronger evidence.

8. Recommendations

- Use standardized and validated measures of child emotional, behavioural and social functioning.

- Include reports from children, teachers and both parents where feasible.
- Measure work hours, commuting time, job demands, parental stress and workplace flexibility.
- Recruit larger and more representative samples across districts and socioeconomic groups in Kerala.
- Examine family size and caregiving arrangements as potential moderators or confounders.
- Use longitudinal designs to examine developmental changes over time.
- Compare the quality and quantity of parent–child interaction rather than employment category alone.

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Declarations

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No funding information was reported in the supplied research project.

Conflict of Interest

No financial or non-financial conflict of interest was reported in the supplied research project.

Data Availability

The analysis was based on the survey dataset supplied for the research project. Individual level data are not reproduced in this manuscript.

Consent

Recorded consent to participate was used as an eligibility criterion in the analysis.

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