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The Influence of Social Support on Child-Parent Relationship Among Chinese Mothers of Preschoolers in Penampang, Sabah

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ABSTRACT

In the early years, deep contact with parents builds a solid attachment and serves as the foundation for the child's future social relationships. Several studies indicated that social support influences the child-parent relationship. However, there are no published studies that investigated the influence of social support on child-parent relationship among Chinese mothers with preschool children in Sabah. This study aims to examine the status of social support and child-parent relationship among Chinese mothers of preschoolers in Penampang, Sabah. As well, to examine the influence of social support on child-parent relationships. In this study, 165 Chinese mothers of preschool-aged children were involved. The result indicated that Chinese mothers perceived moderate social support and closeness child-parent relationship. Moreover, social support is weak positively correlated to closeness relationship, whereas not related to conflict relationship. There is no significant influence of social support on child-parent relationship. This study would like to provides parents, educators, and the government with a preliminary picture of social support and child-parent relationship to develop a strategy to improve or adjust early childhood education.

Contribution/Originality: This study is one of very few studies which have investigated social support and child-parent relationship in Sabah context. Furthermore, the participants focus on Chinese mothers of preschool children, they are also rare examined in existing literature. This information is beneficial to the literature, parents as well as government authorities.

1. Introduction

In early childhood development, the child-parent relationship is extremely important. The interaction between child and parent is constantly evolving and serves as the foundation for children to socialize and gain social support (Horstman, Hays, & Maliski, 2016), achieve emotional regulation (Lincoln, Russell, Donohue, & Racine, 2017), and learn (Callanan et al., 2020).

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Sabah is the third most populous state in 2020 located in east Malaysia. Chinese is the largest non-indigenous group, accounting for 7.3% of the total population of 3.4 million people in Sabah. In addition, Penampang district has a 16.2 thousand population in 2020 (Demographics of Sabah, 2022).

Several studies stated that the child-parent relationship is associated with social support (Su & Hynie, 2011; Russo, 2019; Gambin et al., 2020). Understanding the influence of social support on child-parent relationships may assist researchers in guiding and supporting positive parenting practices (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Child-parent Relationship

The term "child-parent relationship" was coined by Sears (1951) to describe the socialization of parent and child. On the other hand, Flykt (2014) defined the child-parent relationship as "a very special type of relationship that typically begins in pregnancy and is characterized by strong bonds between children and their parents" (especially mothers). In addition, the child-parent relationships is characterized by closeness and conflict between the parent and the child (Driscoll & Pianta, 2011).

In Malaysia, Fanti and Henrich (2010) stated the child-parent relationship may have an impact on the development of children's behavior problems. In Kuala Lumpur, Yap (2015) studied the parents of 405 private preschool children and found that conflict relationship was positively correlated with children's internalizing and externalizing issues. Conflicts in child-parent relationships was also found to have a moderating effect on the relationship between effortful control temperament and behavior problems in preschoolers. Furthermore, parent-child communication is important in the parent-child relationship. It was discovered that both parenting and advice-giving are important in preventing delinquency among Malaysian adolescents (Aw, Widiarti, Setiawan, Mustaffa, Ali, & Hastasari, 2020). Ahmad et al. (2014) discovered that parental bonding and parental connectedness protect against sexual encounters among school children using data from the World Health Organization Global School-based Student Health Survey 2012 (Ahmad et al., 2014). Compare to father-child intimacy, mother-child intimacy is stronger associated with adolescent suicidal ideation (Wu & Yaacob, 2017).

In Malaysia, limited studies of child-parent relationship found out closeness relationship was reported by respondents Azlina, Hui and Daud (2019), Ee and Arshat (2017), Kosnin, Hui and Daud (2019). The study of Chung, Lanier, Yuh, and Wong (2020) and Riany, Cuskelly and Meredith (2017) also found out closeness child-parent relationship among parents in Singapore and Indonesia respectively. However, there are no published studies that investigated the child-parent relationship among Chinese mothers with preschool children in Sabah.

2.2. Social Support

According to Cohen and Wills (1985), social support can be identified as information that is accepted by others who are loved, valued, esteemed, and cared for. Social support encompasses a multitude of social interactions with one’s spouse, extended family, friends, and others (Siklos & Kerns, 2006).

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In Malaysia, Azharkamandi (2018) examined relationships between self-esteem, parent-child relationship, social support and life satisfaction among 175 Iranian adolescents in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The results presented that self-esteem mediated partially the relationships between social support, father-child relationship, and mother-child relationship with life satisfaction. On other hand, Khodarahimi, Hashim and Mohd-Zaharim (2016) examined social support in 308 undergraduate students in Malaysia and the result indicated that Chinese participants perceived lower support than other race participants. Moreover, a study of 136 Malaysian citizens over the age of 18 years indicated that Chinese perceived high social support. However, the score is lower than Malay and Indian (Saifuddin, Lian, Chong, & Bonn, 2019).

2.3. Child-parent relationship and social support

Bronfenbrenner (1979) defined the environment as a nested system of four social systems. The micro-level system is the layer closest to the child, and it includes all of the relationships and interactions that a child has firsthand. This could be in the form of a family, school, neighborhood, or childcare setting. The connections between the elements of the microlevel system, such as the links between the family system and school, are represented by the meso-level system. The external system refers to the larger social system with which the child has direct interactions, such as the parents' workplace. The macrolevel system is the child's environment's outermost layer, consisting of cultural values, customs, and laws, and can represent both the immigrant child's parents and the host culture. Events at all levels of this system have an impact on child-parent relationships. For example, events and situations in the system can influence parenting behavior, such as stress in the parents' work environment, emotional support from family members, and interactions with school environments, all of which can affect the child's social, emotional, and academic development (Su & Hynie, 2011).

Several studies indicated that social support positively influences the child-parent relationship. For example, Gambin et al. (2020) assessed the role of social support in the child-parent relationship in 459 Polish mothers and fathers. The findings revealed that social support is the best predictor of positive experiences in child-parent relationships for both mothers and fathers. McGuire-Schwartz (2007) examined the relationships between family and social support, as well as early mother-child bonds, in two different cultural contexts with ten at-risk families and children under the age of five. The findings of the case study suggest that there are positive relationships between family social support and child-parent bonds. Moreover, Russo (2019) studied 436 parents with children aged 3 to 12 months. Relationships between parent-infant bonding, perceived social support, and parent mental health. The findings show that a parent's satisfaction with overall social support is linked to a strong parental-infant bond.

Adolescent development is found that influenced by social support and child-parent bonds together. Nguyen (2013) investigated the impact of social support and child-parent relationship quality on adolescent development. The results of the study showed significant effects on social support and quality of child-parent relationships associated with lower levels of depression. Contrary to popular belief, the quality of child-parent relationships was associated with lower levels of social satisfaction as the main effect of having higher levels of social support.

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In conclusion, previous studies indicated that social support can influence parenting styles (Su & Hynie, 2011) and social support can positive influence child-parent relationship (Gambin et al., 2020; McGuire-Schwartz, 2007; Russo, 2019; Green et al., 2007).

3. Method

3.1. Participants

A data collection form was created online using Google Forms which was distributed to each of the respondents through an online google form. The questionnaires are provided in both English and Bahasa Melayu versions. The inclusion of mothers' race is Chinese or Non-Chinese. Data were collected from 235 individuals in Tadika Chung Hwa Penampang between 12 and 30 September 2022. A total of 70 participants are Non-Chinese mothers were excluded from the study, and therefore the research sample comprised 165 participants. As a reward, the participating parents will get a preschool drawing book as a gift.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Multidimensional scale of perceived social supports (MSPSS-M)

The Malay version multidimensional scale of perceived social support (MSPSS-M) is one of the many scales designed to assess social support. The MSPSS-M is a self-administered social support survey. The MSPSS (Zimet et al., 1988) is a 12-item questionnaire with a 7-point scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) measuring three sources of support, namely family (items 3, 4, 8, and 11), friends (items 6,7,9, and 12) and significant others (items 1,2,5 and 10). To calculate mean scores by summing all 12 items, then divide by 12.

In the original 7 Likert scale version, ranging from 1 to 2.9 could be considered low support; a score of 3 to 5 could be considered moderate support; a score from 5.1 to 7 could be considered high support. However, the scale is modified to a 5 Likert scale in this study. After transformed, a score ranging from 1 to 2 could be considered low support; a score of 2.1 to 3.5 could be considered moderate support; a score from 3.6 to 5 could be considered high support in this study. A higher score indicates greater social support. The original MSPSS was translated into the Malay version (MSPSS-M) by Ng, Amer Siddiq, Aida, Zainal, and Koh (2010), and permission to adapt MSPSS-M was granted by the original developer of the questionnaire.

3.2.2. Child-Parent Relationship Scale

Child-Parent Relationship Scale-Short Form (CPRS-SF) was developed by Dr. Robert Pianta at the University of Virginia in 1992. It is a self-report questionnaire that parents use to examine the relationships with their children aged 3 to 12 (Pianta, 1992). The questionnaire using a five-point scale from 'Definitely does not apply' to 'Definitely applies' (code 1 to 5). The conflicts subscale consists of 8 items (No. 2,4,8,10,11,12,13,14). The closeness subscale consists of 7 items (No. 1,3,5,6,7,9,15). Higher scores indicate higher level of that subscale depending on the calculation of mean score for each subscale.

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The CPRS-SF has showed good reliability and criterion validity in previous studies (e.g., Driscoll & Pianta , 2011; Dyer, Kaufman & Fagan, 2017; Escalante-Barrios et al., 2020; Bate, Pham, & Borelli, 2021). The instrument is specifically adapted to suit preschool children and their parents who are the target participant of this study.

3.3. Data Analyses

The data of pilot study are analyzed using SPSS version 28. First, descriptive statistics were used to analyze the demographic information questionnaire such as child age, child gender, and subscale of social support and child-parent relationship, which included frequency, percentages, and mean. Cronbach's Alpha was used for analyzing the consistency reliability. Secondly, the Pearson correlation coefficient matrix was used to determine the relationship between social support and child-parent relationship. Finally, regression analysis was employed to examine the influence of social support on child-parent relationship.

4. Result

A sample of 165 mothers with preschool children in Tadika Chung Hwa Penampang, Sabah was selected as the sample. The result showed in Table 1, out of 165 accepted questionnaires from 235 respondents, male preschoolers (56.4%) were more than female preschoolers (43.6%). The majority of the preschoolers are at the age of 5 years old (35.2%), followed by 4 years old (33.9%) and 6 years old (30.9%).

Table 1: Profile of Respondents

Variable (N=165)	Category	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Child's age	4 years old	56	33.9
	5 years old	58	35.2
	6 years old	51	30.9
Child's gender	Male	93	56.4
	Female	72	43.6
Social support	Low	24	14.5
	Moderate	96	58.2
	High	45	27.3
Child-parent relationship	Conflict	34	20.6
	Closeness	131	79.4

4.1. Reliability Test

Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha is used to test the inter consistency reliability. Table 2 shows the results of the reliability test of the study. The Cronbach's Alpha for the social support scale (α = 0.907) and child-parent relationship scale (α = 0.92) showed high reliabilities.

Table 2: Cronbach's Alpha for Tested Variables

Variables	Scale	Total Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Remarks
Social support	Significant Others	4	0.922	Independent
	Friends	4	0.892	
	Family	4	0.907	

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Child-parent relationship	Total	12	0.907	Dependent
	Conflict	7	0.899	
	Closeness	8	0.941	
	Total	15	0.92	

Table 3 presents the bivariate correlation between social support and child-parent relationship. The social support was correlated with closeness relationship (p=0.022<0.5) and no correlation with conflict (p=0.165>0.5). The Pearson's r showed social support was weakly positively correlated with closeness as the Pearson's r was 0.179 in the range between 0 and 0.3.

Table 3: Pearson's Correlation between Social Support and Child-parent relationship

	Closeness		**Conflict**	
	r	**Sig. (2-tailed)**	**r**	**Sig. (2-tailed)**
Social support	0.179	0.022	-0.108	0.165

Table 4 provides the finding of regression analysis of social support towards child-parent relationship. The value of R-square was 0.001, which meant that social support accounts for 1% of the variation in child-parent relationship. The F-statistics value were 0.218 (p>0.05). This showed that social support did not have a significant influence on child-parent relationship.

Table 4: Regression Analysis of Social Support and Child-parent Relationship

Model Summary[b]						
Model	**R**	**R Square**	**Adjusted R Square**	**Std. Error of the Estimate**	**F**	**Sig**
1	.037[a]	.001	-.005	.87095	0.218	0.641
a. Predictors: (Constant), Social support						
b. Dependent Variable: CPR						

In Table 5, the p value of social support is 0.641 more than 0.05. This meant social support cannot significantly predict child-parent relationship

Table 5: Regression Analysis of Social Support and Child-parent Relationship (Coefficients[a])

Coefficients[a]						
		Unstandardized Coefficients		**Standardized Coefficients**		
Model		**B**	**Std. Error**	**Beta**	**t**	**Sig.**
1	(Constant)	3.182	.242		13.126	<.001
	Social support	.037	.078	.037	.467	.641
a. Dependent Variable: CPR						

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, Chinese mothers perceived moderate social support (M=2.979) in Penampang, Sabah. The result is better than previous studies which indicated that Chinese participants perceived low social support in Malaysia (Khodarahimi et al., 2016).

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However, the result is lower than the study of Saifuddin, Lian, Chong and Bonn (2019) which stated Chinese participants perceived high social support.

The finding was consistent with the study of Ma (2020) which indicated that Chinese parents perceived moderate social support in China. However, high social support among Chinese parents has reported by previous research (Lu, Wang, Lei, Shi, Zhu, & Jiang, 2018; Ma, Lai, & Lo, 2017; Zhang et al., 2018; Chen, 2016; Huang, Zhang, & Chen, 2019) in China. In addition, the study of Lei and Kantor (2021) showed there is low social support among 167 caregivers under 18 years of age in Sichuan, China.

Chinese mothers perceived a closeness relationship with their preschool children based on the result that the closeness subscale (M=4.406) is higher than the conflict subscale (M=2.415). It indicated that Chinese mothers of preschoolers perceived closeness relationship in Penampang, Sabah. The finding is opposite to the study of Laible and Thompson (2002) which indicated that there was an increase conflict in child-parent relationship during the early childhood and preschooler years. However, the result support the preschoolers' sample studies in China (Xu et al., 2018; Li & Liu, 2020; Liu et al., 2022). Similarity, the finding of the present study was consistent with previous work in Malaysia (Ee & Arshat , 2017; Azlina et al., 2019); in Singapore (Chung et al., 2020) and in Indonesia (Riany et al., 2017).

The result of Pearson's correlations indicated there was a relationship between social support and closeness, whereas there was no significant relationship between social support and conflict. Furthermore, r with a value of 0.179 showed that social support was weak positively correlated to closeness relationship. The finding of this study was consistent with Gambin et al. (2020) which indicated that social support was positively associated with positive experiences in the parent-child relationship. Similar, social support was found that benefit to relieved depression and stress, as well as build stronger parents and children relationship (McGuire-Schwartz, 2007). The study of Russo (2019) also indicated that parental satisfaction with overall social support is related to a closeness parental-infant bond.

This study found the different evidence with social support can influence child-parent relationship in Canada (Su & Hynie, 2011) and social support can positive influence child-parent relationship in Poland (Gambin et al., 2020); in the USA and Ireland (McGuire-Schwartz, 2007); in the USA (Green, Furrer, & McAllister, 2007; Russo, 2019).

6. Implication

This study is among the first to explore the influence of social support on child-parent relationship in Sabah context. This study provided an initial picture of social support and child-parent relationship among Chinese mothers of preschoolers in Penampang, Sabah. Filling the literature gap that there was no published relevant research conducted in Sabah. Moreover, the study also revealed that Chinese mothers perceived moderate social support and closeness child-parent relationship. Moreover, social support is positive related to closeness relationship.

This knowledge is important for the planning and development of supportive interventions for Malaysian parents and children. The information gained from the descriptive findings is beneficial to the relevant government authorities, The Ministry of Education, Family and community development, and The Ministry of Health. These

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authorities can take initiative in providing necessary assistance to parents and children such as campaigns or interventions to teach parents about the skills of nurturing a positive child-parent relationship in developing healthy outcomes for children. The information will provide a foundation for parents and the government to improve the quality of parenting and population.

7. Limitation

The present study employed a self-report questionnaire. The self-report questionnaire is relatively subjective and might not respond in reflecting the exact situation. Hence, data collection should consider multi-sources, such as teachers to get closer to reliable. Despite these limitations, present study contributed to the understanding of the parenting and child-parent relationship among Chinese mothers of preschoolers. Future investigations may aim to utilize interviews, in-person data collection, or objective measures. The current study is online, self-report nature may lead to response bias. Still, the online style of the current study allowed the researchers to reach a greater, more diverse population in a short amount of time.

On the other hand, this study is also limited by the absence of the father's voices. Fathers always play a breadwinner role in a family and might lack enough time to accompany children. Another possible explanation is that fathers are less involved in child-rearing than mothers in co-parenting families and have limited concern and energy for co-parenting. Future work could consider other possible moderating variables such as race, religion, and socioeconomic status or use a wider range of participants to build a more detailed picture of the quality of child-parent relationship in Sabah, Malaysia context.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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