



Children Left Behind: How to Mitigate the Effects and Facilitate Emotional and Psychosocial Development[☆]



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Supportive community networks can diminish the negative effects of parental migration

The migration of parents affects their children in many ways. Often, parents migrate at a stage in their children's development when they are especially in need of a stable environment. Indeed, parental migration can affect a child's poverty level and sense of abandonment. Additionally, particularly when mothers migrate, their older children may have to spend more time doing housework and taking care of other family members and therefore may pay less attention to school activities.

Similarly, if men migrate, women may be required to spend more time engaged in paid work, which reduces the time mothers have to spend with their children. Other potential consequences for children left behind when parents migrate include inadequate family bonding, inconsistencies in parental roles, emotional vulnerability, and exposure to violence.

In addition, parental migration can lead to difficulties with cultural identity, given the frequent absence of one's former cultural figures. This lack of identity can lead to contradictions

[☆] This program has been supported by Bernard Van Leer Foundation (MX-2008- 066/MB1411), to whom we would like to express our appreciation.

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in essential social norms and customs, including those having to do with health and nutrition practices. In fact, there may be confusion and even a breakdown of moral values, as is the case when children develop the (mis)perception that even though key members of their family are away, they have advantages over their peers because the remittances they receive.

As highlighted in a 2009 United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) report on the effect of migration on children in the Caribbean, children who are left in the care of other relatives (e.g., uncles, grandparents) or neighbors may be more likely to suffer abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Sometimes children left behind are considered *abandoned* because their caregivers either lack interest in their development or lack the time needed to care for the children. This label can result in bullying in school and increased grief, anxiety, anger, resentment, and hopelessness.

In both rural and urban contexts, parental migration also affects community networks. Moral conflicts develop between those who approve of and support migration as an option for providing better futures for children and individuals who see migration as abandonment of the community and having negative consequences for children. These differences further the disintegration of the bonds and collaboration required for community development and for building systems of comprehensive support for children.

Research conducted in Southeast Asia by Elspeth Graham and Lucy Jordan found caregiver mental health status to be a key and consistently important predictor for comprehensive well-being and development among children left behind because of parental migration. Data have suggested that the negative effects of migration on child safety and development can be strongly diminished if

families can undertake compensatory adjustments through community networks and the support of caregivers – either friends or extended family members – who do not normally reside with the children.

UNICEF has recommended that policies and programs be developed to ensure that children who live under conditions of risk, abuse, or abandonment receive proper attention in order to mitigate the psychosocial effects of parental migration. The recommendations included gearing such policies and programs toward improving medium- and long-term developmental prospects for these families and children. It was also recommended that greater attention be given to the development, instrumentation, and evaluation of these comprehensive policies and programs, and in particular, that attention be given to psychosocial impact of migration on children.

UNICEF recommended that training programs be developed to prepare local staff to recognize traits associated with the psychosocial effects of parental migration. Finally, the recommendations encouraged strengthening academic research and policy analysis in order to fully understand how parents' migration affects children left behind.

Underlying these recommendations is an awareness of the need to prevent children from being in situations of de facto abandonment or from experiencing decreased life chances and opportunity because of parental absence.

The Mexican Context, IMIFAP (Yo quiero Yo puedo), and Children Left Behind

In Mexico, migration is an option employed by individuals to improve life chances for



children. Early opportunities for learning in combination with emotional and nutrition care increase the likelihood that a child left behind will attend to school and become an adult with a higher income and better physical and mental health.

Keywords: migration; children left behind; child abuse and neglect prevention; Mexico; nongovernmental organization; program development; community development; caregiver support

Suggestions for Further Reading

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