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## Comparing social skills between children of single-child and multiple-children families

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Considering the increasing rate of single-child families, this study aimed to compare social skills between children of single-child families with multiple-children families.

**Materials and Methods:** This descriptive-analytical study conducted in 2016 among primary schools in Gorgan. The participants included 336 children aged 9-12 years. They were selected through cluster sampling method. Gersham and Elliott's social skills questionnaire was completed by parents and teachers. The data analyzed by SPSS software, t-test, and ANOVA statistics.

**Results:** In this study, 366 children aged 9 to 12 years (150 girls and 216 boys) were entered. Among these children, 163 were single-child, and 203 of them had at least one sibling. Social skills in the teacher's special form showed a significant difference between the two groups ( $P < 0.01$ ). The mean score of behavioral problems and academic adequacy in both parent and teacher forms did not differ significantly between the two groups. Children who had parents with higher educational degrees and employed mothers received higher scores in educational adequacy.

**Conclusion:** Based on the findings, that scores of social skills are higher in children of multi-children families than single children. Children who had high-educated parents have higher educational adequacy and less behavioral problems than their peers with low-educated parents.

**Keywords:** Behavioral problems, Parent, Single child, Social skills.

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## Introduction

Social skills are a complex set of vital skills to adapt to stressful situations, developing healthy relationships, and influencing overall performance (1). Collaborating with others, helping, starting a relationship, asking for help, praising others, and thanking and appreciating are examples of social skills (2).

In the last decade, there has been a steady decline in the average household size and single-child families are increased. It has been pointed out that not having siblings and being more intimate with adults can have a negative effect on adjustment and social life (3). In the past, it was reported that single children received too much attention due to lack of siblings, had premature puberty, and became selfish, dependent, and capricious, compared to children with siblings (4). Some evidence does not support this cliché about single children. They concluded that single children have social skills like as children with siblings and it seems that single children have more friends than multiple children (5). Single children are very similar to the first children and have more self-confidence than multiple children (6).

Studies on single children which impacted on social behavior have conflicting results. One study found that the social skills of single children did not differ significantly from those of multiple children (1). In contrast, a study by Sang et al. showed that people with younger sisters had higher social skills than people who had not siblings (7). There is little data available to compare the characteristics of single children and multiple children (8).

The fertility rate in our country is rapidly decreasing, so that the percentage of single-child families has increased from 13.8% in 1986 to 28.5% in 2011. Despite the growing trend of single children in Iran, few studies have been conducted on behavioral problems, especially the social behaviors of these children. Based on a study in Tehran, children in multiple children families are in a much better position regarding behavioral problems than single children (9). In contrast, another study in Shiraz showed no significant difference in the social adjustment of single and multi-child students (10). As mentioned, due to the gap in this field especially in our country and conflicting findings, this

study aims to compare social skills in children between single-child families and multi-children families.

## Materials and Methods

This descriptive-analytical study conducted in 2016 among primary schools in Gorgan. The participants included 336 children and the sampling conducted class and cluster method. In this way, first a list of primary schools was prepared and then 12 primary schools were randomly selected from 4 categories: governmental and non-profit girl schools, and governmental and non-profit boy schools (three groups from each group). Then, from the first to the sixth grade of elementary school, people were randomly selected to participate in the study. The number of samples was calculated according to the results of the study of Kagdas et al. in 2012 (8).

Participants were assured that their information remained confidential and that their participation in the study was voluntary. The researcher introduced to the parents, teachers and people and explained the purpose of this research. Also, the researcher obtained informed consent for the cooperation of the parents of the participants. The present study has been approved by the ethics committee of Gorgan University of Medical Sciences Research Center. The approval of the ethics committee has been issued by the supervisory review board and the ethics committee of Gorgan University of Medical Sciences (ethics code: IR.GOUMS.REC: 1395-116).

Inclusion criteria included parents and teachers who are willing to participate in the study and complete the Gersham and Elliott Social Skills Questionnaire (1990) for their students. Children with a history of any known cognitive problems were also excluded. The reliability and validity of Gersham and Elliott's social skills questionnaire have been investigated by Gersham et al. (11).

Also, the reliability and validity of the Persian version of this questionnaire has been reported as desirable by Islami et al. (12). The special form for parents and teachers of primary school has been used. The special form for teachers has 57 items and is divided into 3 categories: 1.

Factor of social skills including subscales: cooperation (10 questions), daring (10 questions), self-control (10 questions). 2. The cause of difficult behaviors including subscales: external behaviors (6 questions), internal behaviors (6 questions), hyperactivity (6 questions), 3. factor of academic adequacy (9 questions). The special form for parents has 55 items and is divided into 2 categories: 1. Factor of social skills including subscales: cooperation (10 questions), daring (10 questions), responsibility (10 questions), self-control (10 questions). 2. The cause of difficult behaviors including subscales: external behaviors (6 questions), internal behaviors (6 questions), hyperactivity (6 questions). In order to score this scale, for each of the three options: often, sometimes, never. The values 2, 1, and 0 were considered, respectively. In the case of academic adequacy, the options are excellent, somewhat good, moderate, and somewhat weak (5,4,3,2,1). A higher score on social skills and academic adequacy indicates a higher level of social and

academic skills. Also, a higher score on problem behaviors indicates more behavioral problems (12). After collecting the data, it was entered in SPSS statistical software (version 16) and t-test and ANOVA statistical tests were performed.

### Results

In this study, 366 children aged 9 to 12 years (150 girls and 216 boys) were entered. Among them, 163 are single-child and 203 are multiple-children. Social skills, behavioral problems, and children's educational adequacy were evaluated by Gersham Elliott's questionnaire in two separate versions and completed by parents and teachers. Comparing the mean score of social skills in the special form of teacher by t-test, a significant difference was observed between two groups of single-children and multiple-children.

However, no significant difference was observed between the two groups of single-children and multiple-children in the scores of behavioral problems and academic adequacy in both parent and teacher forms (Table 1).

**Table 1.** The difference between the mean indices of single and multiple-children

Variable	Average difference	P
Academic adequacy	-0.27	0.70
Parental social skills	-0.36	0.75
Parental behavioral problems	0.25	0.71
Teacher social skills	-3.14	0.01
Teacher behavioral problems	-0.54	0.50

To compare the mean of the evaluated indicators, there was no significant difference between boys in single-children and multiple-children families. However, in girls, the mean score of social skills in the questionnaire filled by teachers were significantly lower in single-children than multiple-children ( $P= 0.04$ ).

In term of parents educational status, higher educational adequacy was observed in children whose father had a bachelor's degree compared to undergraduate education ( $P=0.01$ ). Higher education adequacy was also observed in children whose mothers had a bachelor's or

master's degree compared to undergraduate education ( $P=0.03$  and  $P=0.005$ , respectively). Also, results through ANOVA test showed that children who had mothers with higher education than bachelor's degree had less behavioural problems than children with under-graduated mothers ( $P= 0.04$ ). The results showed that children whose mothers were employed had higher educational adequacy ( $P= 0.006$ ) and lower behavioral problems ( $P= 0.02$ ) compared to children with unemployed mothers according to both parent and teacher questionnaires (Table 2).

**Table 2.** The scores based on maternal and paternal education and maternal employment

Variable	Father's education		Mother's education		Mother's employment	
	Average square	<i>P</i>	Average square	<i>P</i>	Average square	<i>P</i>
Academic adequacy	166.05	0.04	267.6	0.003	337.09	0.007
Parental social skills	69.13	0.61	145.10	0.23	34.29	0.72
Parental behavioral problems	63.97	0.21	121.33	0.02	179.5	0.01
Teacher social skills	85.05	0.64	93.93	0.60	240.80	0.17
Teacher behavioral problems	73.28	0.41	43.68	0.67	248.9	0.03

### Discussion

This study was conducted on 150 girls and 216 boys aged 9-12 years. Among them, 163 children are single-child and 203 of them belonged to multiple-children families. The results showed that significant difference between single and multiple children in social skills based on teacher form of Gersham Elliott's questionnaire. However, no significant differences were indicated between single-children and multiple-children in the scores of behavioral problems and academic adequacy in both parent and teacher forms. In addition, children had parents with higher educational degrees and employed mothers had higher educational adequacy.

Given that in the last decade, the frequency of single-child families is increased, it seems necessary to study the effects of having one child (13).

In this study, Gersham Elliott's questionnaire was used. Components such as cooperation, assertiveness, self-control and empathy are some of the things that can be extracted from this questionnaire. A series of persistent social behavioral problems in children can lead to a range of functional disorders such as aggression and the violation; factors such as social poverty, economic poverty, the existence of any deprivation and incompatibility, especially in a large family, are effective in the prevalence of these problems (14).

This study showed that social skills based on teacher's special form in the group of single-children are significantly lower than multiple-children. This finding highlights the importance

of siblings in the development of children's social skills. The score given by the teachers is more indicative of children's social skills than the score given by parents, because teachers evaluate children in a school environment that has more social interactions. One of the most important studies on children's social perceptions in single-child and multiple-children families was published in 2008 by Downey et al. (15). This study was performed on 20,000 preschool children and examined their interpersonal and social abilities.

In line with the results of our study, researchers showed that children from large families have more social and interpersonal skills than single children. In contrast, another study by Yucel et al. (16) on 1662 adolescents in middle and high school showed that social skills were not associated with being a single-child and that the effect of being the single-child disappears over time and at older ages. However, several studies confirm the results of our study on the importance of multiple-children in improving social skills (17,18).

Our results showed that the mean score of academic adequacy and behavioral problems obtained from both forms of parents and teachers in children of single-child and multiple-children families did not differ significantly. This finding suggests that being a single-child has no effect on one's academic achievement and problem behaviors. Our results were in line with other studies conducted in this field. In a study by Goodarzi et al. on 837 elementary school students (14) to evaluate behavioral disorders using the CSI-4 questionnaire, the

results showed that the frequency of children's behavioral problems was not related to the number of children in the family. These findings were confirmed in other studies (6).

Postgraduate education in mothers has also affected children's behavioral abnormalities. The results of the present study indicated that children with mothers who had higher education than bachelor degree had lower score in behavioural problems. These results may be due to the fact that educated mothers have more studies and knowledge in the field of behavioral interaction with children and they manage and solve behavioral problems in children better than ungraduated mothers.

The impact of maternal higher education on children compared to paternal higher education on children has rarely been considered by researchers, while recent research suggests that maternal education levels are closely related to social class and child rearing in both single-child and multiple-children groups. Consequently, the importance of the role of maternal education in the frequency of behavioral disorders is considerable (14).

The results showed that the mean score of educational adequacy in children with educated parents was significantly higher than children with undergraduate parents.

In other words, parents with higher education pay more attention to high education and its value for their children. Also, due to the educational success of parents, especially mothers, there is a higher ability to guide their children education-wise. In line with the results of our study, Khan et al. in Pakistan examined the effect of parents' level of education on children's academic achievement. The results of this study showed that children's academic achievement is directly related to parental education (19). In 2018, a study was conducted in Nigeria to examine the impact of parental education on students' academic achievement. Researchers have shown that students with higher educated parents had higher academic achievement (20).

The mean score of social skills based on teachers form indicated that single-child girls had lower social skills significantly. Single-child girls seem to have lower social skills, but this issue was not seen in boys, because single-child

boys are more likely to communicate with outside the home and gain more social skills.

The relationship between maternal employment and assessed indicators was much more important than fathers. The results showed that children with employed mothers had higher educational adequacy and fewer behavioral problems than children with unemployed mothers according to both the parents and teachers forms. Due to the mother's closer relationship with the child, the effect of the mother's employment on the child is more obvious.

Some factors limit the results of this study. First, although the role of several underlying factors in this study has been considered, some socio-economic factors such as income level and place of residence have not been considered. Second, these results cannot be generalized to other age groups. Despite these limitations, the study also had strengths, including the acceptable sample size and sampling method, which led students to enter the study with different social backgrounds, which increases the generalizability of the results.

It is suggested that the impact of gender on the social skills of single-children be further evaluated by studies. In the translation of Gersham Elliott's questionnaire, the word impulsive behavior has been used, which is not familiar to most parents and teachers, and the meaning of this term has been the question of the majority of study participants. Therefore, it is suggested that a brief explanation of its meaning be attached to the questionnaire, so that it won't affect the accuracy of the questionnaire.

### Conclusion

Social skills are higher in multiple-children families than in single-child families. The study also found that children with educated parents had higher educational adequacy and fewer behavioral problems than their peers with low-educated parents.

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