

# Internalizing Behavior Problems of Children from Broken Families

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## Abstract:

**Background:** Internalizing disorders occur in individuals exhibit over control of their behavior; also known as a secret illnesses. Childhood internalizing behaviors are highly prevalent impairing conditions.

**Objectives:** To highlight the internalizing behavioral problems among children of broken family.

**Materials and methods:** A cross sectional study was conducted in Personal Status Courts in Baghdad. A total of 92 children of separated parent aged 6 – 11 years were included in the study. Male to female ratio was 1.2:1. A special designed questionnaire was used for data collection. Children with obvious internalized behaviors are those with  $\geq 50\%$  of the total score. Chi square and fisher's exact test were used alternatively.

**Results:** Fifty children (54%) children were with obvious internalized behaviors problems. Children aged 6 – 8 years old, female gender, dropped out of school, and failed in school performance had obvious internalized behaviors problems (32, 28, 9, 37; 61.5%, 68.3%, 64.3%, 86%, respectively). Custodial parent with internalized behaviors problems were mainly fathers (8; 100%); those who had a job were 37 (50.7%) and remarried were 12 only (57.1%).

**Conclusions:** Broken homes affect negatively on school achievement and mental development of children. Females were highly affected by broken homes. Children's age was with no effect on internalized behavioral problems.

**Keywords:** - Broken Homes, Childhood Behavioral Problems, Internalizing Disorders.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Internalizing disorders occur in individuals exhibit over control of their behavior; also known as a secret illnesses. <sup>1</sup> Childhood internalizing behaviors are highly prevalent impairing conditions.<sup>2</sup> Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, 5th Edition (DSM-5), describes internalizing features as a range of mood and anxiety disorders. Children may be diagnosed with major depressive disorder, dysthymia, somatic disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and posttraumatic stress disorder; or with one or more of anxiety disorders

(specific phobia, separation anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, selective mutism, panic disorder, agoraphobia, and generalized anxiety disorder). <sup>3</sup> The prevalence rate of childhood anxiety disorders was estimated to be 12.6% for children aged 6 to 12 years old.<sup>4</sup>

Home plays a very important role in the formation of the child's personality and socialization; and parents providing a safe base and haven when needed.<sup>5,6</sup> In divorce, children lose daily contact with one parent; most often fathers.<sup>7, 8</sup> Unfortunately in the recent years, there is a high rate of divorce in Iraq.<sup>9</sup>

Children experience anxiety in divorced families, which in turn had a strong negative effects on the mental health development.<sup>10</sup> CDC reported that children living with one biological parent were three to eight times more likely to experience neighborhood violence, caregiver violence, or caregiver incarceration or to live with a caregiver with mental illness, an alcohol or drug problem.<sup>11</sup>

In Iraq, no literature on internalized behaviors problems among children with divorced parents. This was the impetus to carry out this study.

## ➤ Objectives

To highlight the internalizing behavioral problems among children of broken family.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A cross-sectional was carried out at Personal Status Courts in Baghdad-Iraq from August 2021 to December 2021. A total of 92 children of separated parent were included in the study. Their age was 6-11 years giving male to female ratio of 1.2:1.

An interview was done with child's custodial parent in the court, (Privacy was considered). Collecting data was done for three months, using a structured questionnaire. A questionnaire of 2 parts; Sociodemographic features (age, sex, grades, school achievement of last year, Duration of separation, information about the Custodial parent) and Internalizing Behavior problems, a subscale of Behaviors

Problems Index (BPI). Children with obvious internalized behaviors are those with  $\geq 50\%$  of the total score.<sup>12</sup>

Chi square and fisher’s exact test were used alternatively to examine the impact of independent variables (age, sex) on the dependent variable (internalizing behavior problem).  $P < 0.05$  was considered significant.

### III. RESULTS

Out of the total, there were 52 (56.5%) children within age group 6-8 years. Children with first three grades of primary school were 46 (50%), and those dropped out of school were 14 only (15.2%). Success rate in school achievement was noticed among 49 children (53.3%), and failure rate was noticed in 29 children (31.5%). Divorce period was 6-10 years among 63% of families and 1-5 years among 37% of them. The majority of custodial parents were the mothers (84; 91.3%). Those with a Job were 73 (79.3%) and only 21 of them remarried again (22.8%). Table (1) shows the characteristics of the study sample.

**Table 1: Sociodemographic features of children and their custodial parent**

Variables		No.	%
Age Group	6-8 years	52	56.5
	9-11 years	40	43.5
Gender	Male	51	55.4
	Female	41	44.6
Grade	1 <sup>st</sup> three grades	46	50
	Last three grades	32	34.8
	Drop out of school	14	15.2
School achievement	Success	49	53.3
	Failed	29	31.5
	Drop out of school	14	15.2
Period of divorce	1-5 years	34	37.0
	6-10 years	58	63.0
Custodial Parent	Father	8	8.7
	Mother	84	91.3
Custodial parent has a Job		73	79.3
Custodial parent remarried		21	22.8
Total		92	100.0

Fifty children (54%) children were with obvious internalized behaviors problems.

Table 2 shows distribution of factors affect the obvious internalized behaviors problems. Children aged 6 – 8 years old, female, dropped out of school, and failed in school

performance had obvious internalized behaviors problems (32, 28, 9, 37; 61.5%, 68.3%, 64.3%, 86%, respectively). Custodial parent with internalized behaviors problems were mainly fathers (8; 100%). Those who had internalized behaviors problems and a job were 37 (50.7%) and who remarried were 12 only (57.1%).

**Table 2: Distribution of factors affecting the internalizing behavior problems in children:**

Demographic features		Total	Obvious internalized behaviors		P value
			No.	%	
Age	6 – 8 years	52	32	61.5	0.08
	9 – 11 years	40	18	45.0	
Gender	Male	51	22	43.1	0.01
	Female	41	28	68.3	
Grades	1 <sup>st</sup> three grades	46	29	63.0	0.04
	Last three grades	32	12	37.5	
	Drop out	14	9	64.3	
School performance	Success	49	13	26.5	0.001
	Failed	43	37	86.0	
Divorce period	1 – 5 years	34	19	55.9	0.5
	6 – 10 years	58	31	53.4	
Custodial parent	Father	8	8	100.0	0.006
	Mother	84	42	50.0	
	Had a job	73	37	50.7	0.13
	Remarried	21	12	57.1	0.48

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The high observed rate of obvious internalized problems (54%) might be attributed to broken homes. Several articles documented this statement. Loss one of parents, whether the mother or father, may inhibit the development of emotion regulation and effortful control in children and adolescents, which in turn may lead to behavioral problems.<sup>7, 13</sup>

Shifts in parenting figures during childhood have been frequently linked to child's emotional and behavioral problems.<sup>14</sup> The mechanism by which shifts in family structure affect a child's development is a complex and likely depends on individual and contextual factors. The change in home or residence and change in family structure may interfere with emotional development of children<sup>15</sup>.

Age had no impact on internalizing problems ( $p = 0.08$ ). This figure is consistent with that in literature<sup>16</sup>.

Significantly females showed IBP more than males ( $p = 0.01$ ). This finding is in the line with USA studies<sup>17, 18</sup>. It is well known that females are more emotional than males. Raising a female leads to strong bond with her father (father's figure) this might explain our finding.

Obvious internalizing behavioral problems were significantly observed among dropped out school children ( $p = 0.04$ ). It is a manifestation of low school achievement among children with broken homes. The root of the problems is certainly not single parenthood itself, but rather a combination of financial stress, family diversity, and fighting between parents<sup>19</sup>. This is similar to that of India<sup>19</sup>.

Low school achievement was significantly observed among children with obvious internalized behavioral problems ( $p = 0.00$ ). Low academic performance in Iraq was attributed to exposure to violence<sup>20</sup>. Broken homes is an added factor. A study reported that children in single parent households score below children in two parent households, on average on measures of educational achievement<sup>21, 22</sup>. This suggests that the rise in single parenthood has lowered the educational achievement of children.

It is well known that family instability during early childhood can negatively affect the child's emotional and behavioral development. Conflicts between parents may be related to the child's emotional and behavioral problems.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Broken homes affect negatively on school achievement and mental development of children. Females were highly affected by broken homes. Children's age was with no effect on internalized behavioral problems.

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