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A systematic review of key determinants of behavioural problems in children in India

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Abstract

Behavioural problems in children, including aggression, hyperactivity, anxiety, and depression, have become a growing concern globally, with significant implications for individual and societal well-being. In India, rapid socio-economic changes, urbanization, and evolving family dynamics have amplified these issues. The prevalence of behavioural problems in Indian children is influenced by a complex interplay of socio-economic, familial, cultural, and educational factors. This systematic review aims to examine and synthesize the key determinants contributing to behavioural problems in children in India, by analysing studies published between 2019 and 2024. A comprehensive search strategy was employed, including peer-reviewed articles from databases such as PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The review focuses on socio-economic status (SES), family structure and parental influence, educational stress, and cultural norms as the primary determinants. Despite the insights provided by this review, limitations exist due to the heterogeneity of the studies, small sample sizes in some cases, and the lack of longitudinal research. This review emphasizes the need for targeted interventions at the family, school, and community levels, addressing the multi-dimensional factors contributing to behavioural problems. It also calls for further research, particularly long-term studies, to better understand the persistent effects of these determinants and to guide more effective policy development and mental health interventions in India.

Keywords: Systematic review, behavioural problems, children

Introduction

Behavioural problems in children, such as aggression, anxiety, hyperactivity, and conduct disorders, are becoming increasingly prevalent in many countries, including India. These issues are not only significant from a clinical perspective but also carry long-term consequences for children's academic achievement, social development, and overall well-being. The prevalence of these problems has been rising due to multiple socio-economic, familial, cultural, and educational factors that shape child development (Patel *et al.*, 2022) [15]. In India, a rapidly growing economy and increasing urbanization have led to shifts in family dynamics, education systems, and social structures. These changes, while offering many opportunities, have also introduced stressors that can adversely affect children's mental health. For instance, children from low socio-economic backgrounds often face significant challenges, such as inadequate nutrition, lack of healthcare, and overcrowded living conditions, all of which can contribute to the development of behavioural problems (Radhakrishnan & Sridhar, 2020) [2]. Moreover, family-related factors, such as parental mental health, family conflict, and absence of parental involvement, can either mitigate or exacerbate the manifestation of these problems (Sharma & Singh, 2019) [14]. Educational pressures also play a crucial role in shaping children's mental health. India's highly competitive academic environment, combined with large class sizes, limited resources, and insufficient teacher training, can lead to stress, anxiety, and behavioural issues, particularly in urban areas (Gupta & Pandey, 2021) [5]. Additionally, cultural factors such as gender expectations, traditional norms, and societal pressures can influence how children express and experience behavioral problems. In rural areas, children may also face unique stressors related to agricultural work, familial expectations, and limited access to mental health services (Kumar & Agarwal, 2018) [4]. Given these multifaceted determinants, it is essential to explore the specific factors contributing to behavioral problems in Indian children. Identifying these factors can help guide targeted interventions, inform policy decisions, and improve mental health services for children across the country.

PICOT Question

In children aged 5-18 years in India (P), how does socio-economic support and family-based interventions (I) compared to no intervention or standard care (C) affect the reduction in behavioural problems such as aggression and anxiety (O) over a period of 6 months to 1 year (T)?

Methods

This study employs a **systematic review** methodology to examine the key determinants of behavioral problems in children in India. The following steps outline the approach taken to systematically review and synthesize the existing literatures:

- Formulating the Research Question:** The primary research question guiding this review was: *What are the key determinants of behavioral problems in children in India?* Sub-questions focused on identifying socio-economic, familial, cultural, and educational factors that contribute to childhood behavioral issues, such as aggression, anxiety, and hyperactivity.
- Defining Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:** The inclusion criteria for the studies were:
 - Studies that focused on children aged 5-18 years.
 - Research examining at least one determinant of behavioural problems, including but not limited to socio-economic status, parental involvement, educational pressures, or cultural factors.
 - Studies published in English between 2020 and 2024.
 - Peer-reviewed journal articles, both qualitative and quantitative studies.

The exclusion criteria were:

- Studies focusing on adult populations.
- Research that did not explicitly address behavioural problems.
- Non-peer-reviewed articles and grey literature.

Results

Table 1: Evaluation of studies’ quality scoring system tool developed by hawker *et al.* (2002)

Author(s)	Abstract	Introduction & Aim	Instrument	Sampling	Data Analysis	Ethics	Results	Implications	Total Score (45)	Rating
Patel, V. <i>et al.</i> (2022) ^[11]	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	45	Good
Radhakrishnan, R. & Sridhar, M. (2020) ^[22]	5	5	5	5	4	5	4	5	43	Good
Sharma, P. & Singh, N. (2019) ^[31]	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	45	Good
Kumar, S. & Agarwal, A. (2018) ^[41]	5	5	4	5	4	5	5	5	43	Good
Gupta, A. & Pandey, R. (2021) ^[51]	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	44	Good
Araya, R. <i>et al.</i> (2020) ^[61]	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	44	Good
Mishra, S. & Sinha, P. (2020) ^[71]	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	44	Good
Patil, S. <i>et al.</i> (2019) ^[81]	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	45	Good
Gupta, R. <i>et al.</i> (2021) ^[91]	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	4	43	Good
Pandey, A. & Verma, M. (2022) ^[101]	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	44	Good
Sharma, R. <i>et al.</i> (2021) ^[111]	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	45	Good
Jain, R. & Kapoor, N. (2020) ^[122]	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	45	Good
Singh, A. & Choudhary, A. (2021) ^[133]	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	45	Good
Sharma, M. <i>et al.</i> (2019) ^[144]	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	44	Good
Kumar, M. <i>et al.</i> (2022) ^[155]	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	45	Good
Verma, R. & Mehta, S. (2023) ^[166]	5	5	5	4	4	5	5	4	42	Good
Patel, R. <i>et al.</i> (2020) ^[177]	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	45	Good
Das, S. <i>et al.</i> (2021) ^[188]	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	45	Good
Khan, N. <i>et al.</i> (2020) ^[199]	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	4	43	Good
Mehta, A. <i>et al.</i> (2023) ^[200]	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	45	Good

Key determinants of behavioural problems in children in India

In understanding behavioural problems in children, a range of factors ranging from individual traits to societal and

- Studies conducted outside India or those without clear reporting of determinants.
- Identifying Relevant Studies:** The relevant studies were identified through a comprehensive search strategy in electronic databases such as PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar, and JSTOR. The search terms included "behavioural problems," "children," "India," "determinants," "socio-economic," and "family dynamics." Additionally, a manual search of reference lists from relevant articles was conducted to identify further studies.
 - Study Selection:** After an initial screening of titles and abstracts, studies that appeared relevant were selected for full-text review. These were then assessed based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The final selection comprised 20 studies that were most relevant to the research question.
 - Data Extraction and Quality Assessment:** Data from the selected studies were systematically extracted using a standardized form. Information extracted included the study's focus, population sample, methodology, key findings, and identified determinants of behavioural problems. The quality of the studies was assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist, with studies categorized based on their methodological rigor (high, moderate, or low quality).

Data Synthesis and Dissemination

A narrative synthesis of the data was conducted, grouping the identified determinants into key themes such as socio-economic factors, parental influence, educational stress, and cultural aspects. The findings were compiled into a summary report. The results will be disseminated through academic publications, presentations, and shared with stakeholders, including policymakers and mental health professionals, to inform targeted interventions.

1. Socioeconomic Status (SES)

One of the most consistent findings across studies is the significant role of socioeconomic status in influencing behavioural problems in children. Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often face higher levels of stress, lack of access to proper nutrition, healthcare, and educational opportunities. These stressors can manifest as internalizing (e.g., depression, anxiety) or externalizing (e.g., aggression, hyperactivity) behavioural problems. Studies have shown that children in poorer families may experience neglect or have parents who struggle with mental health issues, further exacerbating the risk of behavioural disorders (Patel *et al.*, 2022; Kumar & Agarwal, 2021) ^[5, 17].

2. Parental Mental Health

The mental health of parents has been identified as a significant determinant of children's behaviour. Children of parents with mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, or substance abuse are more likely to exhibit behavioural problems. These parents may struggle to provide emotional support, consistent discipline, or stable relationships, all of which are essential for a child's emotional development. A history of parental mental illness is often associated with a higher likelihood of behaviour problems such as aggression, low academic performance, and social withdrawal (Sharma & Singh, 2019; Radhakrishnan & Sridhar, 2020) ^[14, 2].

3. Parenting Style

Parenting style is a key influence on childhood behavioral development. Studies have shown that authoritarian or neglectful parenting styles characterized by either excessive control or a lack of engagement are linked to a higher incidence of behavioral issues. Conversely, authoritative parenting, which emphasizes warmth, responsiveness, and appropriate discipline, has been shown to lead to better emotional regulation and fewer behavioral problems. In India, where traditional values and family dynamics play a crucial role, parenting practices that emphasize obedience over emotional support can contribute to externalizing behaviors such as aggression and defiance (Gupta & Pandey, 2021; Patil *et al.*, 2019) ^[5, 8].

4. Exposure to Violence and Abuse

Exposure to domestic violence, physical abuse, and emotional neglect is a critical determinant of behavioral problems in children. Children who are exposed to violence in the home or community are more likely to develop symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), aggression, and antisocial behavior. These experiences can disrupt children's emotional regulation and lead to difficulties in forming positive peer relationships. Evidence from India shows a clear link between exposure to familial violence and higher rates of conduct problems and emotional issues (Sharma *et al.*, 2021; Mishra & Sinha, 2020) ^[11, 7].

5. Academic Stress

India's educational system, with its intense academic pressure and emphasis on high performance, is a unique determinant of behavioral problems. Children who struggle with academic expectations, face peer competition, or experience bullying in school may develop stress-related behaviors such as anxiety, depression, and behavioral

withdrawal. Research highlights that academic stress, coupled with a lack of support from home or school, can lead to behavioral issues like truancy, aggression, and emotional disturbances (Kumar *et al.*, 2022; Singh & Choudhary, 2021) ^[24, 13].

6. Peer Influence and Social Interactions

Peer relationships significantly impact children's behavior. Peer pressure can lead to both positive and negative behavioral outcomes. Negative peer influences can contribute to risk-taking behaviors, substance abuse, or aggression. On the other hand, positive peer interactions can provide emotional support, facilitate social skills, and help children manage conflicts constructively. In India, social stratification and peer relationships in schools or communities can impact children's behavior, with negative peer interactions often exacerbating behavioral issues (Singh & Choudhary, 2021; Gupta *et al.*, 2021) ^[13, 5].

7. Cultural and Societal Norms

The socio-cultural environment in which children are raised greatly impacts their behavior. In India, societal norms related to gender, caste, and academic success can place significant pressure on children, contributing to issues such as anxiety, low self-esteem, or aggression. For example, children from marginalized communities or those under pressure to conform to traditional gender roles may experience stress that manifests in behavioral problems. Cultural norms that prioritize academic excellence may lead to heightened stress, particularly in children who do not meet these expectations (Jain & Kapoor, 2020; Das *et al.*, 2021) ^[12, 18].

8. Health and Nutrition

Proper nutrition is critical for cognitive development and emotional regulation in children. Studies have shown that malnutrition and deficiencies in essential nutrients such as zinc, iron, and vitamin D can lead to behavioral issues such as irritability, difficulty focusing, and hyperactivity. Additionally, children with chronic health conditions (such as asthma or diabetes) may experience emotional distress, which can contribute to behavioral problems. Early childhood interventions aimed at improving nutrition and healthcare can mitigate some of these risks (Araya *et al.*, 2020; Kumar *et al.*, 2022) ^[6, 15].

9. Substance Abuse within the Family

Substance abuse within the family, particularly by parents, is strongly correlated with behavioral problems in children. Children exposed to substance abuse are at a higher risk for neglect, emotional abuse, and modeling dysfunctional coping mechanisms. This increases the likelihood of behavioral disorders, such as aggression, anxiety, and substance misuse later in life. Family interventions targeting substance abuse can help reduce the impact on children's mental health and behavioral development (Verma & Mehta, 2023) ^[16].

10. Genetic and Biological Factors

Genetic predispositions to behavioral disorders such as attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and mood disorders are significant determinants of behavioral problems in children. Neurodevelopmental disorders and genetic factors play a

role in how children respond to their environment and manage emotions. Children with a family history of psychiatric disorders are more likely to develop similar issues, underscoring the importance of early identification and intervention for at-risk children (Khan *et al.*, 2020; Mehta *et al.*, 2023) ^[19, 20].

Discussion

The findings from this study highlight several key determinants that contribute to behavioral problems in children in India, particularly socio-economic factors, parental mental health, and parenting styles. Children from low socio-economic backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to behavioral issues due to factors like poverty, limited access to quality education and healthcare, and family stress, which has been consistently linked to higher rates of aggression, anxiety, and depression (Patel *et al.*, 2022) ^[15]. Additionally, the mental health of parents is a critical determinant, as parents suffering from depression, anxiety, or substance use tend to struggle with providing stable emotional support and effective discipline, leading to behavioral challenges in their children (Sharma & Singh, 2019). Moreover, the type of parenting practiced at home plays a significant role in shaping a child’s behavior. Authoritarian or neglectful parenting styles, which are common in many parts of India, have been associated with higher rates of externalizing behaviors such as aggression and defiance, while authoritative parenting characterized by warmth, support, and appropriate discipline has been shown to lead to more positive behavioral outcomes (Gupta & Pandey, 2021; Patil *et al.*, 2019) ^[5, 8].

In addition to these familial and socio-economic factors, exposure to violence and abuse is a significant determinant of behavioral problems in Indian children. Studies indicate that children who witness domestic violence or experience physical abuse often struggle with emotional regulation, aggression, and social withdrawal (Mishra & Sinha, 2020) ^[7]. These traumatic experiences can disrupt a child’s emotional development and lead to maladaptive behaviors that persist into adulthood. The impact of such experiences highlights the importance of early intervention and support for both children and parents, to mitigate the long-term

psychological and behavioral consequences of abuse. These findings emphasize the need for multi-dimensional interventions, including improving socio-economic conditions, providing mental health support, and promoting positive parenting practices to address the complex causes of behavioral problems in children in India.

Limitations

- Limited Time Frame:** The studies reviewed were restricted to those published between 2019 and 2024, which, while ensuring timeliness, may exclude older studies that could provide important historical context or reveal long-term trends in the determinants of behavioral problems in children.
- Cross-Sectional Designs:** The majority of studies included in this review utilized cross-sectional designs, which only provide a snapshot of data at one point in time. This limits the ability to establish causal relationships between the identified determinants and behavioral problems, as cross-sectional studies cannot determine the directionality or cause-effect relationships.
- Cultural and Regional Variations:** The findings from this review may not be universally applicable across all regions of India due to cultural differences, variations in family structures, and regional socio-economic conditions. Determinants of behavioral problems may vary in different parts of the country, making it difficult to generalize the findings.
- Limited Methodological Diversity:** The studies reviewed primarily employed quantitative methods, which may overlook the nuanced, qualitative aspects of children’s behavioral problems and the underlying determinants. Future research incorporating mixed-methods approaches could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issue.
- Lack of Longitudinal Studies:** The absence of longitudinal studies in this review means that the long-term impacts of identified determinants on children’s behavioral problems remain unclear. Longitudinal studies are necessary to better understand how early-life influences shape behavioral outcomes over time.

Author(s)	Country	Aim	Design	Sample Size	Instrument	Results / Conclusion
Patel, V. <i>et al.</i> (2022) ^[11]	India	To identify socio-economic and familial factors influencing behavioral problems in children	Cross-sectional study	500 children	Survey questionnaires	Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to exhibit behavioral problems due to stressors like poverty and family instability.
Radhakrishnan, R. & Sridhar, M. (2020) ^[2]	India	To evaluate the impact of parental mental health on children’s behavior	Longitudinal study	300 children	Parent and child surveys	Parental mental health conditions, especially depression and anxiety, were strongly associated with increased behavioral problems in children.
Sharma, P. & Singh, N. (2019) ^[3]	India	To assess the role of parenting styles in the development of behavioral problems	Experimental study	450 children	Parenting style questionnaire	Authoritative parenting was linked to fewer behavioral problems, while authoritarian and neglectful parenting contributed to behavioral difficulties.
Kumar, S. & Agarwal, A. (2018) ^[4]	India	To explore the relationship between exposure to violence and children’s behavior	Cross-sectional study	400 children	Interviews with parents and children	Exposure to domestic violence was associated with higher levels of aggression and emotional regulation difficulties in children.
Gupta, A. & Pandey, R. (2021) ^[5]	India	To examine the influence of socio-economic status on children’s behavior	Case-control study	350 children	Structured interviews	Children from low-income families displayed higher rates of behavioral problems such as aggression and withdrawal.
Araya, R. <i>et al.</i> (2020) ^[6]	India	To explore the impact of community violence on child behavior	Cohort study	300 children	Behavior checklists	Community violence exposure significantly impacted emotional stability and led to aggressive behavior in children.
Mishra, S. & Sinha, P. (2020) ^[7]	India	To assess the impact of school environment on behavioral problems in children	Cross-sectional study	500 children	School behavior assessments	A positive school environment was linked to better behavioral outcomes, while poor school conditions contributed to more behavioral problems.

Patil, S. <i>et al.</i> (2019) ^[8]	India	To assess the relationship between parenting and children's behavioral outcomes	Cross-sectional study	450 children	Parenting questionnaire	Effective parenting practices, including positive reinforcement, were associated with better behavioral regulation in children.
Gupta, R. <i>et al.</i> (2021) ^[9]	India	To analyze the role of familial communication in children's behavior	Descriptive study	500 children	Family communication scale	Poor communication within families was correlated with higher rates of emotional distress and behavioral problems in children.
Pandey, A. & Verma, M. (2022) ^[10]	India	To explore the association between child behavior and parental education level	Cross-sectional study	400 children	Parental education questionnaire	Children of less educated parents exhibited higher behavioral problems, particularly in emotional regulation.
Sharma, R. <i>et al.</i> (2021) ^[11]	India	To investigate the effects of parental involvement in education on children's behavior	Longitudinal study	350 children	Parent-child interaction assessment	Increased parental involvement in education led to fewer behavioral issues and better emotional outcomes for children.
Jain, R. & Kapoor, N. (2020) ^[12]	India	To assess the impact of sibling relationships on children's behavior	Cross-sectional study	450 children	Sibling relationship questionnaire	Positive sibling relationships were linked to better social skills and fewer behavioral problems.
Singh, A. & Choudhary, A. (2021) ^[13]	India	To examine the role of peer relationships in the development of behavioral problems	Descriptive study	400 children	Peer interaction scale	Negative peer interactions, such as bullying, were strongly associated with behavioral problems like aggression and anxiety.
Sharma, M. <i>et al.</i> (2019) ^[14]	India	To explore the impact of nutritional deficiencies on children's behavior	Experimental study	300 children	Nutritional assessment	Nutritional deficiencies, particularly iron and vitamin D, were linked to increased irritability and attention difficulties.
Kumar, M. <i>et al.</i> (2022) ^[15]	India	To evaluate the effect of social media on children's behavior	Cross-sectional study	450 children	Social media usage survey	Excessive use of social media was associated with increased behavioral issues such as aggression and social withdrawal.
Verma, R. & Mehta, S. (2023) ^[16]	India	To study the impact of sleep disorders on children's behavior	Cohort study	350 children	Sleep behavior questionnaire	Sleep disorders, including insomnia and sleep apnea, were found to increase irritability and concentration difficulties in children.
Patel, R. <i>et al.</i> (2020) ^[17]	India	To investigate the effects of early childhood trauma on behavior	Longitudinal study	400 children	Trauma history assessment	Early childhood trauma was strongly linked to long-term behavioral problems, including aggression and social withdrawal.
Das, S. <i>et al.</i> (2021) ^[18]	India	To examine the association between academic stress and behavioral issues in children	Cross-sectional study	450 children	Academic stress scale	Academic stress, particularly in competitive environments, was associated with higher rates of anxiety and behavioral issues.
Khan, N. <i>et al.</i> (2020) ^[19]	India	To explore the relationship between family structure and children's behavioral problems	Descriptive study	400 children	Family structure questionnaire	Children from single-parent families were more likely to exhibit behavioral issues such as aggression and anxiety.
Mehta, A. <i>et al.</i> (2023) ^[20]	India	To analyze the role of gender differences in the expression of behavioral problems	Cross-sectional study	500 children	Gender and behavior scale	Boys were more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors, such as aggression, while girls showed higher rates of internalizing behaviors, such as anxiety.

Conclusion

Behavioral problems in children in India are influenced by a complex interplay of socio-economic, familial, and environmental factors. This review highlights that children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to behavioral issues due to the stressors associated with poverty, lack of resources, and limited access to quality education and healthcare. Furthermore, parental mental health, including conditions like depression and anxiety, plays a significant role in shaping children's behavior, as these conditions often result in inconsistent or ineffective parenting. The study also underscores the importance of parenting styles, with authoritative parenting being associated with better behavioral outcomes, while authoritarian or neglectful parenting may contribute to emotional and behavioral difficulties in children. Exposure to violence, whether within the home or the community, also emerged as a key determinant, with children witnessing or experiencing abuse being more prone to issues like aggression, anxiety, and difficulty with emotional regulation. Addressing these factors requires a holistic approach that includes improving socio-economic conditions, providing mental health support for parents, and promoting positive, supportive parenting practices. By focusing on these determinants, interventions can be designed to reduce the prevalence of behavioral problems and support the healthy emotional and social development of children in India. Effective strategies should aim at

prevention, early intervention, and providing a stable, nurturing environment for children to thrive.

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