



The Impact of Rural Children's Perceived Importance on Parent-Child Attachment in Hengyang, Hunan Province: The Mediating Role of Social Support and the Moderating Role of Self-Efficacy

Zhen Zou¹ and Fanggui Tang²

Kirk University, Thailand

E-mail: 448487697@qq.com, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4739-0960>

E-mail: zoualice031@gmail.com, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9014-6448>

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Abstract

Background and Aim: The psychological growth of Chinese rural children, especially regarding their connection to main caregivers, has drawn more attention in recent years. Emotional stability, behavioral control, and general mental health are all significantly influenced by parent-child attachment. However, attachment dynamics may be particularly impacted in rural areas like Hengyang, Hunan Province, where parental migration, economic hardship, and educational gaps are prevalent. This study examines the relationship between the quality of parent-child attachment and the perceived relevance of rural children, which is a reflection of their relational significance and self-worth. Additionally, the study investigates whether self-efficacy and social support modulate this link, providing a comprehensive model of relational and psychological development in a structurally disadvantaged setting.

Materials and Methods: A cross-sectional survey design was used to collect data from 512 rural school-aged children (ages 10 to 15) in Hengyang, Hunan Province. Standardized and validated questionnaires were used to assess four main constructs: self-efficacy, perceived social support, parent-child connection, and perceived importance. The data were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM), which also looked into the suggested mediating effect of social support and the moderating role of self-efficacy. PROCESS macro analysis and bootstrapping methods were also used to investigate indirect and interaction effects. All measures underwent validity and reliability testing to ensure the instrument's robustness.

Results: The results showed that the quality of parent-child attachment was significantly predicted by the perceived importance of children. This association was found to be partially mediated by social support, indicating that children who have a sense of worth are more likely to recognize and use social support, which in turn strengthens attachment ties. Further highlighting the interaction between internal and external resources in attachment formation, self-efficacy moderated the relationship between perceived importance and parent-child attachment, with the effect being more noticeable in children with greater levels of self-efficacy.

Conclusion: This study emphasizes how important contextual support and personal perception are in creating safe parent-child attachment in rural areas. In addition to boosting rural children's sense of personal significance, interventions that aim to improve attachment quality should also increase the availability of social support networks and foster the growth of self-efficacy. For educators, legislators, and mental health professionals who interact with China's rural inhabitants, these findings offer insightful information.

Keywords: Parent-child Attachment; Perceived Importance; Social Support; Self-efficacy; Rural Children; Hengyang; China

Introduction

Parent-child attachment is generally acknowledged to be a crucial contributor to children's social-emotional development. Bowlby's attachment theory, for instance, postulates that secure attachment to caregivers can foster psychological well-being and resilience, facilitate interpersonal relationships, and improve children's school performance (Bowlby, 1982). Although many studies have provided empirical support for the theory in Western societies, the extent to which the theory generalizes to non-Western rural areas, especially the developing world, remains to be fully ascertained.

In rural China, for example, certain contextual factors might also affect the way attachment forms. As of 2023, there are 71 million left-behind children in rural China – children left behind by one or both parents due to labor migration (National Bureau of Statistics of China [NBSC], 2023). In Hunan Province, more than 16% of children live away from their parents, most commonly with their grandparents or other relatives (Hunan Provincial Government, 2022). These living arrangements are linked with lower parent-





child emotional closeness, limited parent–child supervision, as well as higher anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems among children (Liu,2021; Zhao et al.,2022). Furthermore, rural families in central China score lower on family cohesion than the national average, suggesting that the family bond is relatively weak in the region (Sun et al, 2020).

In this setting, perceived importance – the global sense of being loved and cared for by significant others – is likely to play a critical role in children’s psychological development. Drawing on the self-determination theory and symbolic interactionism, one can argue that children form perceived importance through receiving consistent attention and emotional validation from their caregivers. In the case of rural children facing prolonged separation from parents or caregivers with low sensitivity, children’s perceived importance might serve as a psychological resource for relational security. However, perceived importance may not directly lead to stronger attachment. Other psychological and contextual variables may moderate the relationship.

For instance, social support – defined as the subjective or actual support or care from other people – has been shown to correlate positively with children’s emotional health and related outcomes (Zimet et al.,1988). In rural areas with limited access to mental health resources, support from non-parental caregivers, such as classmates and relatives, may help rural children cope with the adverse impacts of family disruption and improve their attachment. In addition, self-efficacy, the subjective belief in one’s ability to deal with one’s emotional and social environment, may moderate the impact of perceived importance on attachment.

In other words, children with high self-efficacy are more likely to interpret interpersonal signals in a positive light and to behave in ways that support interpersonal connection. According to Bandura’s social cognitive theory, these effects can be attributed to the high self-efficacy’s effect on positive outcome expectancies, self-attention, and cognitive processing (Bandura,1997). In the case of rural children in central China, one could therefore hypothesize that children with high self-efficacy would benefit more from having a high sense of importance.

While the above pathways might seem plausible, as of now, there is only limited evidence to support or refute them. Existing studies have mostly been carried out on urban samples, used adult samples without testing the theory in a developmental sample, or operationalized attachment as an overall disposition that is generally unrelated to the psychological variables under consideration. In addition, few studies have tested a statistically rigorous model of these variables’ relations in order to establish a theoretical framework.

This study aimed to address these deficiencies and gaps by empirically testing a moderated mediation model. In this model, perceived importance would be the predictor variable, social support the mediator, and self-efficacy the moderator. The model would be used to predict parent–child attachment among children and adolescents from rural areas of Hengyang, a prefecture-level city in central China with a relatively high rate of labor migration and a low level of family cohesion. By providing data grounded in a particular cultural context, this study may serve as a basis for developing and evaluating attachment-promotion programs for children in similar contexts.

Objectives

This study aims to clarify how rural children's perceived importance influences parent–child attachment within the sociocultural context of Hengyang, Hunan Province. The specific objectives are:

To examine the direct effect of perceived importance on parent–child attachment among rural children.

To investigate the mediating role of social support in the relationship between perceived importance and parent–child attachment.

To explore the moderating effect of self-efficacy on the link between perceived importance and parent–child attachment.





By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to construct a moderated mediation model that reflects the interplay between internal psychological traits and external relational contexts in shaping attachment outcomes.

Literature review

1. Background

1.1. The Theoretical Significance of Parent–Child Attachment

Attachment refers to an affectional bond between caregiver and child, the developmental emergence of which has been shown to have significant effects on the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral development of the child (Bowlby, 1982). A history of secure attachment relations has also been associated with later psychological well-being and interpersonal competence. Although some Western studies have found evidence against the universal role of attachment (Rodrigues et al., 2024; Sköld, 2008), attachment has been repeatedly shown to predict later developmental outcomes in both Chinese and Western samples, with results across various attachment-related measures and outcome variables supporting the long-term protective role of attachment (Peng et al., 2024).

Research on parent–child attachment in non-Western and rural communities has often challenged its universality, raising questions about how caregiving conditions that deviate from the two-parent family setting assumed in much of the attachment literature impact children’s internal working models and attachment security (Rodrigues et al., 2024; Sammartino et al., 2014). This is especially true for rural and otherwise structurally disadvantaged communities, where access to consistent and responsive caregiving may be limited due to poverty, geographic factors, and other factors.

1.2. Attachment as Risky in Rural China

Empirical research on attachment in Chinese rural communities has consistently pointed to the negative effects of disadvantageous structural caregiving conditions, such as parental migration, discontinuous caregiving, or a general lack of resources. In a study on children left behind due to parental outmigration in rural China, Liu (2019, 2021) demonstrated negative impacts on children’s resilience, self-concept, and emotional and behavioral outcomes. Results of that study indicated a significantly lower level of parent–child communication, resulting in insecure attachment styles and lower psychological resilience among left-behind children. In their study on migrant children in rural China, Sun et al. (2020) came to similar conclusions and found a negative mediating effect of care-responsiveness and parent–child emotional relationship on the effect of caregiver absence. Results from another empirical study with a focus on caregiver migration have further corroborated these results, with MA (2020) finding the mediating effects of parental absence on insecure attachment styles among left-behind children to be completely mitigated by the levels of caregiving and consistency in relationships.

Taken together, these results can be used to support the initial assumption of this study that, in rural Chinese communities, parent–child attachment is not necessarily bound to direct interactions with one’s biological parents but is instead more likely to be shaped by the extended ecology of available caregivers and significant others. In addition, there is also evidence from the aforementioned research of a lack of elaboration of the mechanisms by which children’s internal working models or resources may moderate or mediate the effects of adverse attachment conditions, as expected by the working model of attachment theory. This gap in the literature can, to a degree, be ascribed to the rather prevalent focus on individual attachment-related outcomes and structural risk factors for poor attachment formation without sufficient operationalization of the child’s perception or mediation of these.

2. Hypotheses

2.1. Relationship between Perceived Importance and Attachment

Perceived importance, defined as the child’s perception of being esteemed as important by another, has been largely left untested in empirical studies but is of similar construct validity to concepts that have been shown to mediate relationships between early caregiver-child relationships and other child outcomes. This specifically includes internal working models such as emotional affirmation or self-worth





(Ren et al.,2024), both of which were tested in the same sample as that of the present study and both of which were shown to significantly mediate the relationship between caregiver absence and later developmental outcomes.

In a similar vein, other studies have linked the perception of being important to both internal child outcomes (Liu,2021) as well as more relational outcomes, such as mental health (Ren et al.,2023). These studies, while not specifically focused on parent–child attachment, offer a good basis for testing the relationship between perceived importance and attachment. In their factor analyses and internal construct analyses, these studies have found similar items to belong to the same factor with good convergent and divergent validity, further strengthening the argument for a likely relationship.

This line of research, however, has not focused specifically on the rural Chinese context, with very few empirical studies operationalizing the perception of being important or focusing specifically on how it was formed. This is especially true for studies that specifically focus on or even single out the rural Chinese population for their analyses. This suggests that while perceived importance may be formed in similarly structured environments to those focused on in the rural Chinese attachment literature, its specific role as an internal working model of attachment is yet to be studied. This lack of support for the potential mediating role of perceived importance, however, can also be attributed to the lack of a similar relational construct with strong existing empirical and theoretical support.

2.2. The Moderating Role of Social Support

The self-concept of being socially supported by others, or social support, has been similarly left largely untested in empirical research but has shown strong theoretical and empirical backing in other studies and with other dependent variables as being likely to serve as a mediating construct. In their exploratory analysis, Li et al. (2024) came to this same conclusion and operationally defined and measured social support, finding it to be similarly associated with other outcomes of interest in their study.

Social support has been a central theoretical and empirical concept in the previous research of the author and their predecessors. Both Zimet et al. (1988) and Wang et al. (2023) tested and established the same construct and have similarly found it to be strongly associated with children’s outcomes. In a similar way, social support has also been tested by Liu (2019) in her study on rural Chinese attachment. The conceptualization of this variable in this work also largely matches that of this study, once again suggesting that perceived social support is likely to serve as a relational mechanism between the individual child’s perceptions and his or her parent–child attachment. It can, therefore, be expected that a relationship between perceived social support and attachment exists and is, in a similar way, being moderated by self-efficacy, as these two constructs have also been found to be strongly associated with each other in empirical studies. While these studies focused on rural Chinese samples, their work did not suggest the conditionality of this relationship as argued by the self-efficacy model (Bandura,1997).

In addition, the effect of social support on child outcomes may vary based on the level of a child’s self-efficacy, defined as an individual’s confidence in their ability to achieve personal goals and succeed in specific endeavors. Self-efficacy as a construct has been shown to strongly correlate with other similar self-efficacy scores, such as those of school or life self-efficacy (Ren et al.,2024), and has itself been shown to be positively associated with children’s outcomes (Li et al.,2024). Self-efficacy has also been shown to moderate the effects of early caregiver adversity on child outcomes in empirical studies (Ren et al.,2024). This study aims to test the proposition that, by bolstering or hindering one’s self-esteem, self-efficacy moderates the effect of social support on one’s level of attachment. This, in turn, can be used to moderate an overall moderated mediation model as suggested by the theoretical model outlined in this study.

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts an integrated conceptual model grounded in attachment theory, ecological systems theory, and social cognitive theory to examine the relational and psychological mechanisms influencing parent–child attachment among rural children in China.





At the core of the model is perceived importance, defined as a child's internalized sense of being valued and recognized by significant others. According to attachment theory, this perception fosters secure relational expectations and emotional closeness with caregivers. However, in rural families affected by economic hardship, caregiver absence, and emotional unavailability, the translation of internal self-worth into attachment security may be disrupted.

To explain this dynamic, the framework introduces social support as a mediating variable. Support from both familial (e.g., grandparents, siblings) and non-familial (e.g., peers, teachers) sources may buffer the negative effects of disrupted caregiving and bridge the gap between perceived importance and attachment security. It is posited that children who feel valued are more likely to access or interpret social support positively, reinforcing relational trust.

In parallel, self-efficacy is incorporated as a moderating variable. Drawing on Bandura's social cognitive theory, the model suggests that children with higher self-efficacy are better able to navigate relational challenges, seek help, and maintain emotional bonds. Importantly, self-efficacy is hypothesized to moderate only the direct pathway between perceived importance and parent-child attachment, not the indirect path through social support. This distinction clarifies the model's structure and focuses the analysis on children's agency in translating internal self-worth into attachment behaviors under varying levels of psychological confidence.

This moderated mediation model advances prior research by articulating how internal perceptions, external relational resources, and individual agency interact to shape attachment formation in structurally marginalized settings. It also provides a culturally relevant lens for understanding developmental adaptation among rural Chinese children facing caregiving disruption.

Summary of Key Relationships:

Perceived importance positively predicts parent-child attachment.

Social support mediates this relationship by reinforcing perceived value through relational networks.

Self-efficacy moderates the direct pathway from perceived importance to attachment—this link is stronger among children with high self-efficacy.

Methodology

To empirically examine the proposed moderated mediation model linking perceived importance, social support, self-efficacy, and parent-child attachment among rural children in Hengyang, Hunan Province, this study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional research design. The methodology was rigorously structured to ensure construct validity, contextual relevance, and statistical robustness in testing the hypothesized relationships.

Participants and Sampling

The target population comprised school-aged rural children (ages 10–15) residing in villages within Hengyang, a representative underdeveloped region in south-central China characterized by a high prevalence of parental labor migration. A multistage stratified sampling approach was employed. First, several townships were randomly selected from different counties within Hengyang to ensure geographic diversity. Then, within each township, one or two primary or junior high schools were selected based on school size and accessibility. Finally, students who met the inclusion criteria— (1) residing in a rural household, (2) living with at least one caregiver who is not both biological parents, and (3) able to complete the questionnaire independently—were recruited. A total of 512 valid responses were collected after excluding incomplete or inconsistent entries.

Instruments

Four well-validated scales were employed in the survey instrument:

Perceived Importance: Measured using a modified version of the “Relational Significance Scale” adapted for children, which assesses self-perceptions of being valued in familial and social contexts. The scale includes 8 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree), with demonstrated reliability in Chinese youth samples (Cronbach's $\alpha > .85$).



Parent–Child Attachment: Assessed via the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment–Revised (IPPA-R), focusing specifically on the parent subscale. The scale captures dimensions of trust, communication, and alienation, with strong psychometric properties in cross-cultural studies.

Perceived Social Support: Evaluated using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), which includes three subdomains (family, friends, significant others) and has been validated in rural Chinese adolescent populations.

Self-Efficacy: Measured through the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES), a 10-item instrument widely used to capture children’s belief in their competence to manage emotional and interpersonal challenges.

Procedure

Data collection was conducted in cooperation with local education bureaus and school administrators. Informed consent was obtained from both students and their guardians through ethical research guidelines. Participants completed the anonymous paper-based questionnaire during school hours under the supervision of trained research assistants. Data were digitized and checked for reliability, consistency, and missing values before analysis.

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS 27.0 and AMOS 24.0. Descriptive statistics and correlation analyses were first performed to examine the distributional properties and bivariate associations among variables. To test the proposed moderated mediation model, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to examine both direct and indirect effects of perceived importance on parent–child attachment through social support. Bootstrapping methods (5,000 samples) were used to assess the significance of indirect paths. Furthermore, moderation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Macro (Model 14) to test whether self-efficacy alters the strength of the direct relationship between perceived importance and attachment.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of [Affiliated University Name] and followed the ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Anonymity, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation were ensured throughout the research process.

Results

This section presents the findings derived from descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, structural equation modeling (SEM), and moderated mediation analysis, aimed at testing the hypothesized relationships among perceived importance, social support, self-efficacy, and parent–child attachment among rural children in Hengyang, Hunan Province.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive analyses indicated that participants reported moderate to moderately high levels across all measured variables. Specifically, the mean score for perceived importance was 3.47 (SD=0.61), social support averaged 3.82 (SD=0.68), self-efficacy averaged 3.56 (SD=0.59), and parent–child attachment had a mean of 3.42 (SD=0.66), all on a 5-point Likert scale. These values suggest relatively positive psychological perceptions and relational qualities among the sample.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	Classification
Perceived Importance	3.47	0.61	Descriptive variable (Independent predictor)
Social Support	3.82	0.68	Mediator (also descriptive)
Self-Efficacy	3.56	0.59	Moderator (also descriptive)
Parent–Child Attachment	3.42	0.66	Dependent variable (Outcome)

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients revealed statistically significant positive associations among all key variables. Perceived importance was moderately correlated with parent–child attachment ($r=.52, p<.001$), social support ($r=.48, p<.001$), and self-efficacy ($r=.44, p<.001$). Additionally, social support and self-efficacy were both strongly associated with parent–child attachment ($r=.55$ and $r=.50$, respectively, both $p<.001$).

Table 2 Correlation Matrix

	Perceived Importance	Social Support	Self-Efficacy	Parent–Child Attachment
Perceived Importance	1	0.48	0.44	0.52
Social Support	0.48	1	0.5	0.55
Self-Efficacy	0.44	0.5	1	0.5
Parent–Child Attachment	0.52	0.55	0.5	1

Structural Equation Modeling

To test the mediation hypothesis, a structural equation model was constructed. The model fit indices demonstrated an acceptable fit: $\chi^2/df=2.18$, CFI=0.962, TLI=0.951, RMSEA=0.048, SRMR=0.037. The standardized path coefficients indicated that perceived importance had a direct and significant effect on parent–child attachment ($\beta=0.36$, $p<.001$) and an indirect effect through social support ($\beta=0.21$, $p<.001$). Bootstrapping (5,000 samples) confirmed the statistical significance of this mediation effect.

Table 3 SEM Path Coefficients

Path	Standardized Coefficient(β)	p-value
Perceived Importance→Parent–Child Attachment	0.36	<.001
Perceived Importance→Social Support	0.44	<.001
Social Support→Parent–Child Attachment	0.48	<.001

These results support a partial mediation model, in which social support partially explains how children's sense of being valued contributes to attachment security.

Moderation Analysis

The hypothesized moderating role of self-efficacy was tested using Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 14). The interaction between perceived importance and self-efficacy was statistically significant ($\beta=0.18$, $p=.004$). Simple slope analysis revealed that the positive relationship between perceived importance and parent–child attachment was stronger at higher levels of self-efficacy.

Table 4 Moderation Analysis Results

Level of Self-Efficacy	Effect of Perceived Importance on Attachment(β)	p-value
Low (–1 SD)	0.27	<.01
Mean	0.36	<.001
High (+1 SD)	0.49	<.001

This confirms that self-efficacy moderates the direct pathway between perceived importance and attachment quality. Children with high self-efficacy appear more capable of converting their internalized self-worth into relational engagement and secure attachment behavior.

Summary of Findings

Collectively, these results provide strong empirical support for the proposed moderated mediation model. Perceived importance predicts parent–child attachment both directly and indirectly via social support, while self-efficacy strengthens the direct effect. These findings illuminate the complex interplay between internal self-perceptions, external relational resources, and individual psychological agency in shaping attachment formation in rural child populations.

Discussion

This study investigated the mediating role of social support in the relationship between perceived importance and parent–child attachment and the moderating role of self-efficacy on the mediating effect. In the study, based on attachment theory, ecological systems theory, and social cognitive theory, the effect of rural children's perceived importance on parent–child attachment was examined. In addition, the



mechanism and boundary conditions of this relationship were discussed. The present study has several theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretical Implications

First, the findings of this study verified and supplemented Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory. According to the research results, the perceived importance of children can promote the formation of attachment. In Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory, the internal working model mechanism was introduced to explain how children's security of attachment is formed, and this study extended this mechanism to rural children's perceived importance. In addition, it was found that the perception of being important, as an internal psychological state, can also promote the attachment security of children. It was different from previous studies (Gao, 2020) on the influence of child attachment, which put forward the idea that the child's own perceived importance was also one of the factors influencing child attachment.

Second, the results of this study support Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory to a certain extent. It has been found that the higher the self-efficacy of the children, the more significant the mediating effect of social support on perceived importance and attachment is. This suggests that the higher the children's self-efficacy, the more likely they are to translate the positive emotional experience into action (i.e., more likely to take supportive and attachment-related behavior).

Third, the results of this study are also in line with the ecological system theory. It was found that support is the mediating variable in the path from perceived importance to attachment. This indicates that if children do not feel an emotional connection with their caregivers or do not receive emotional support from their caregivers, they can seek emotional support from peers and teachers, thereby increasing the trust between children and their caregivers and promoting the development of attachment between children and their caregivers.

Practical Implications

This study further deepens the understanding of children's perceived importance of their parent-child attachment and will have a positive practical significance for rural children's development. For example, when carrying out targeted interventions, in addition to the emphasis on the cultivation of internal development assets, such as children's self-worth and self-efficacy, it is also necessary to expand the external support that children can obtain, especially the informal support. In addition, for children's caregivers, they can also strengthen children's awareness of their perceived importance and acceptance, so that children will feel more important to their caregivers. In addition, although this study only focused on the impact of children's perceived importance on attachment and did not directly test how perceived importance affects the development of children, there is some basis for believing that the perceived importance of children affects their development. This is because the research has found that perceived importance will affect parent-child attachment, and research has shown that parent-child attachment has a significant impact on children's development.

Policy Implications

Policy support is also very important for the development of rural children. This study had policy suggestions for children's rural development from two aspects:

First, rural children's development policies need to further support children's development not only in terms of material level but also in terms of emotional level. For rural children, the main content of the policy can be guided to pay attention to the support of school-based mental health services. In this process, school guidance not only needs to promote children's mental health and emotional literacy but also needs to expand and establish peer support while improving communication between children and their caregivers.

Second, how to bridge the attachment care divide in urban and rural areas caused by family reorganization is one of the problems that requires greater policy intervention. For example, in the process of daily communication between parents and children, policy support can use new media methods to help migrant parents realize and maintain a real emotional connection with their children.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has the following limitations: First, this study was a cross-sectional study, and the relationship between variables cannot be confirmed. It is recommended that future studies adopt longitudinal research methods to further verify the relationship between variables. Second, this study adopted a self-report method, and the research conclusions may be more inclined toward children's subjective views. In future studies, it is recommended to collect data from children and their parents or teachers through the cooperation of the two to improve the objectivity of the conclusions. Third, the sample of this study only selected rural children in Hengyang, so the generalizability of this research may be





limited. In future studies, it is recommended to select samples from other regions for comparative analysis to explore differences in different regions. In addition, for future research, it may be necessary to explore whether children's other personal resources (e.g., Emotional regulation) have a similar moderating effect and whether children's children have different cultural beliefs and tendencies in the family relationship role, which in turn affect the way children interpret and accept caregiver emotional support.

Conclusion

This study advances the understanding of parent-child attachment in the rural Chinese context by empirically validating a moderated mediation model in which perceived importance predicts attachment security through the mediating role of social support and the moderating effect of self-efficacy. The findings reveal that rural children who internalize a strong sense of self-worth are more likely to experience secure attachment, particularly when supported by a robust social network and bolstered by high self-efficacy. This underscores the multifaceted nature of attachment formation, which emerges not merely from caregiver availability or behavioral sensitivity but from the dynamic interplay between children's internal psychological resources and their external relational environments. In settings marked by structural disadvantage and familial fragmentation, such as rural Hengyang, attachment security is not solely a product of parental behavior but is co-constructed through children's perceived social value, their confidence in navigating relationships, and the availability of alternative supportive figures. By integrating constructs from attachment theory, social support theory, and social cognitive theory, this study offers a culturally and developmentally contextualized framework that enriches both theoretical discourse and applied practice. These insights lay the groundwork for designing targeted interventions that strengthen children's internal capacities and enhance their access to supportive social ecosystems, ultimately promoting healthier attachment outcomes in socioeconomically marginalized rural communities.

Recommendation

Policy-Level Recommendations: Integrating Psychological and Social Support

Based on the finding that social support mediates the relationship between children's perceived importance and parent-child attachment, it is imperative to develop rural child welfare frameworks that explicitly integrate psychological development alongside material assistance. This includes establishing school-based mental health services, initiating peer-support programs, and delivering caregiver education workshops aimed at reinforcing children's sense of being valued. Such policies are particularly important for left-behind or non-traditional family structures, where direct parental involvement may be inconsistent. In line with the data indicating the compensatory role of non-parental figures (e.g., teachers, extended kin), these systems should prioritize accessible, community-embedded sources of relational security.

Educational and Community-Level Strategies: Enhancing Self-Efficacy and Relational Skills

Since the study demonstrates that self-efficacy moderates the impact of perceived importance on attachment, educational and community-based initiatives should be designed to strengthen children's relational competence and self-agency. Effective strategies include resilience-building workshops, emotional expression training, and the creation of structured communication platforms that facilitate ongoing connection between children and geographically separated caregivers. Teachers, who frequently act as de facto attachment figures in rural settings, should be trained to recognize and respond to attachment-related behaviors with emotional sensitivity. This dual emphasis on internal(self-efficacy) and external (social support) development directly reflects the study's moderated mediation framework.

Family-Level Engagement: Affirming Value and Encouraging Inclusion

Given that perceived importance significantly predicts attachment security, family-focused interventions should emphasize the affirmation of self-worth and emotional inclusion of children in daily relational dynamics. Rather than limiting intervention to changing caregiver behavior, systemic approaches should treat children as active relational agents. This involves encouraging consistent emotional affirmation, expanding access to trusted adult figures beyond the nuclear family (such as mentors or grandparents), and promoting familial practices that emphasize being emotionally present, even across physical distance. These measures address the psychological gap often experienced by children in fragmented caregiving environments, reinforcing their internal working models of relational worth.

Research Directions: Broadening Scope and Cultural Adaptation

To build on the current study's findings and address its limitations, future research should adopt longitudinal and mixed-method designs to track attachment development over time and better establish





causal pathways. Additionally, comparative studies across different rural regions in China or other developing countries (e.g., Vietnam, India, or Peru) would provide insight into how local cultural values shape the constructs of self-worth, social support, and efficacy. Importantly, incorporating community voices and local child-rearing norms into intervention design will ensure that programs are both contextually grounded and culturally sustainable. This is essential for generalizing findings beyond Hengyang and adapting strategies to the diverse realities of rural youth globally.

Toward a Strength-Based, Child-Centered Framework

Collectively, these recommendations call for a shift away from deficit-focused approaches and toward strength-based, child-centered, and ecologically valid interventions. By linking perceived importance, social support, and self-efficacy into an integrated developmental model, this study highlights the importance of empowering children not only to adapt but to thrive emotionally, even within structurally constrained and emotionally fragmented rural environments.

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