



# Mother–child and teacher–child relationships and their influences on Chinese only and non-only children's early social behaviors: The moderator role of urban–rural status



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## ABSTRACT

Investigations regarding the differences between Chinese only and non-only children primarily examine children's social behaviors, which are closely related to their early relationships with mothers and teachers. In recent years, the number of non-only children born in urban areas has increased because of the softening of the One-Child Policy, which leads to the distribution of non-only children shifting from being primarily in rural areas to being in both urban and rural areas. The present study investigates the current characteristics and influences of mother–child and teacher–child relationships on Chinese only and non-only children's early social behaviors from the perspective of urban and rural differences. Data were obtained from 126 rural only children, 94 rural non-only children, 168 urban only children and 155 urban non-only children from 38 semi-urban kindergartens in Beijing, China. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses found that mother–child closeness positively predicted children's social skills particularly in non-only children, whereas mother–child conflict positively predicted internalizing behavior problems in all four groups. Teacher–child conflict negatively predicted children's social skills most strongly in urban only children. Teacher–child conflict aggravated rural only children's, urban only children's and non-only children's internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, but mother–child closeness buffered rural only children's externalizing behavior problems. Findings underscore the importance for mothers to improve closeness, especially with rural only children, and for teachers to avoid conflict with both urban only and non-only children, as well as with rural only children.

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## 1. Introduction

To limit population growth, China implemented the One-Child Policy (OCP) in 1979. It restricted the number of children that Chinese couples could have to only one child with exceptions for ethnic minority couples, for couples with a severely disabled child, and for rural couples whose first child was a girl. This led to non-only children being distributed mainly across rural areas. Theoretically, urban non-only children (UNOC) would be few. At the present time, however, urban couples increasingly have a second child because of Chinese traditional concepts and the softening of the OCP. According to Confucianism, an ideal family consists of as many siblings as possible (Hillier, 1988). Therefore, Chinese couples try to have several children, particularly sons, even at

the price of fines or social compensation fees (Settles, Sheng, Zang, & Zhao, 2013). The Chinese government began softening the OCP in 2001 by allowing couples to have a second child if *both* of the parents were only children (Xin Hua News Agency, 2001). In 2013, the OCP was further modified to allow couples to have a second child if *one* of the parents is an only child (The 18th Session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, The Third Plenary Session, 2013). Thus, an increasing number of non-only children are being born in urban areas. The change in the distribution of only and non-only children prompted us to investigate the early social behaviors of only and non-only children from the perspective of urban and rural differences.

Previous studies consistently have found that only children demonstrated better academic skills than did children with siblings (Falbo & Poston, 1993; Falbo et al., 1989), but no agreement has been reached regarding early social behaviors (Falbo & Polit, 1986; Settles et al., 2013). A number of factors were found to be related to only and non-only children's social behaviors, such as family structure (Kwan & Ip, 2009), family socioeconomic status (SES; Kwan & Ip, 2009), human and material resources (Davine, 1989; Han, 1986), parenting style (Liu, 2000), and

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interpersonal relationships (Demo & Cox, 2000; Falbo & Polit, 1986; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Among these factors, the mother–child (M–C) relationship and the teacher–child (T–C) relationship, as two primary interpersonal relationships, were shown to be strongly related to children's early social behaviors (Demo & Cox, 2000; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Influenced by the OCP, Chinese families are characterized by smaller networks and looser family and kinship structures that bring out different features of interpersonal relationships and their effects on children's social development (Settles et al., 2013). Interpersonal relationship networks are different between urban and rural areas. For example, there are more extensive interpersonal relationships with relatives and neighbors in rural communities than in urban areas (Yan, 2005); people's social values tend to be more traditional; and social relationships for children, including M–C and T–C relationships, are more personal and tightly knit (Fulgini & Zhang, 2004). However, until now, no study has compared only and non-only children's M–C/T–C relationships and their influences on children's social behaviors from the perspective of urban–rural differences. It is interesting and necessary to explore this issue, considering that only and non-only children have both advantages and disadvantages in interpersonal relationships, and their characteristics are different in urban and rural areas.

### 1.1. Only and non-only children's M–C relationships and their influence on children's early social behaviors: differences between urban and rural areas

The M–C relationship is the first and most important relationship for children (Zhu, 1989). Developmental theorists, ecological theorists and attachment theorists generally view the early M–C relationship as pivotal to children's social development, asserting that it provides a foundation for children to explore the environment and interact with others (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Demo & Cox, 2000). The M–C relationship usually comprises two dimensions: closeness and conflict. Different dimensions affect children in different developmental areas, with closeness having a larger effect on social skills (Iruka, Burchinal, & Cai, 2010) and conflict better predicting behavior problems (Li, Xu, Lv, Liu, & Wang, 2014; Waschbusch, 2002).

Several viewpoints are proposed to explain the differences between only and non-only children's M–C relationships. Some researchers hold the opinion that only children may be more advantaged in M–C closeness compared with non-only children (Blake, 1981; Hao & Feng, 2002), supporting the *Resource Dilution Model* (Blake, 1981). This model proposes that parental resources are finite and that as the number of children increases, resources provided to any specific child decline. In an only child's family, the mother invests all her time and energy in the only child, which undoubtedly increases the chances for maternal contact with the child and is beneficial to the establishment of a positive relationship (Hao & Feng, 2002). Although no study has directly addressed the associations between the M–C relationship and only children's social performance, Hao and Feng (2002) found that, compared with non-only children, only children had more positive M–C interaction and exhibited better social skills and behaviors. The authors suggested that the more positive M–C relationship might favor only children's social development.

Other researchers have suggested that only children may also have more M–C conflict than would non-only children, which then may negatively influence their social behaviors. Mothers of only children hold higher expectations for their children than do mothers of non-only children, as they are the only children that can be invested in (Jiao, Ji, & Jing, 1992) and the single hope for support in old age (Freedman, 1979). For example, Zhang (1998) found that mothers of only children showed excessive control and protection. Such high expectations and over-interference may however bring pressure to bear on only children to meet the high requirements (Roberts & Blanton, 2001), possibly resulting in M–C conflicts, consequently leading to negative social outcomes.

The differences between only and non-only children's M–C relationships may show different patterns in urban and rural areas. In rural areas, mothers are more likely to play the traditional homemaker role and spend much of their time staying at home (Atkinson, 1994). However, they have lower education levels and incomes (Sicular, Ximing, Gustafsson, & Shi, 2007), place less emphasis on children's social development (Coleman, Ganong, Clark, & Madsen, 1989), and therefore, may be harsher in mother–child interactions (Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster, & Jones, 2001). Urban only children (UOC) are the only ones who receive more childrearing resources and attention from adults and probably are more skilled in interpersonal relationships, according to the *Resource Dilution Model* (Blake, 1981). Urban families that have second children usually have more resources to support children's development (Mao & Luo, 2013); for example, many mothers with two children choose not to go to work (Zhen, 2011), allowing more time together. From this view, UNOC's M–C relationships and social development are not necessarily worse than those of UOC.

### 1.2. Only and non-only children's T–C relationships and their influence on children's early social behaviors: differences between urban and rural areas

The T–C relationship is the most vital relationship in early childhood classroom (Pianta, 1999). Zions (2005) noted that teachers served as a secure base during children's navigation and emphasized the need to consider the T–C relationship when examining children's early social behaviors. Attachment and developmental theories posit that children with secure and effective T–C relationships will be able to interact with others more and learn better social behaviors (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta, 1999). Conversely, children with insecure, less-close and more-conflicting T–C relationships will show poorer social skills and show more internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (Elicker, Egeland, & Sroufe, 1992; Iruka et al., 2010).

Except for some speculations based on theory, no empirical study has been found to explore the difference between only and non-only children's T–C relationships. The *Social Learning Model* (Parke & Buriel, 1998) maintains that non-only children may take advantage of their siblings' social experiences. Such experiences may favor their T–C relationship by helping them learn about themselves and others (Brody, 1998), gain affective perspective taking, consider others' feelings and learn to address conflict through interaction with siblings (Youngblade & Dunn, 1995) and observation of parent–siblings interaction (Dunn, Slomkowski, & Beardsall, 1994). Only children have been described as self-centered, isolated and lacking social competence (Falbo & Polit, 1986), which, if true, further makes them disadvantaged in T–C relationships. What is worse, teachers may maintain negative stereotypes about only children, such as “spoiled” and “maladjusted” (Mancillas, 2006), and therefore, may allow their negative perceptions to influence their relationships with only children. From this point of view, lacking siblings may leave only children at a disadvantage in T–C relationships. However, a few researchers hold the different opinion that only children may be equal to their counterparts in T–C relationships. They argue that because of the absence of siblings, only children's parents pay special attention to their socialization and provide opportunities for them to interact with others, such as taking them to visit friends and relatives (Chen, 2010; Hao & Feng, 2002). Only children may apply these social experiences to T–C interaction.

Similar to the M–C relationship, the differences between only and non-only children's relationships with teachers may vary in urban and rural areas. Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, and Bradley (2002) observed 223 suburban and rural kindergarten classrooms and found that positive T–C interactions were fewer when the concentration of poverty in the school was high, the child's family income was low, and the staff–student ratio was low. Students' observed social behavior and teachers' reports of their social competence were also lower. In Chinese rural kindergartens, the staff–student ratio is lower (Zhu, 2011), and children are

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