

# Psychosocial impact of adverse home environment on primary school performance in Cambodia

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## ABSTRACT

There is lack of an in-depth understanding of the impact of psychosocial problems at home on learning performance among primary school children in Cambodia. Hereafter, the aim of this study is to gain a better understanding of the psychosocial challenges that primary school children in Cambodia face at home and how those affect their school performance. The semi-structure interviews were conducted with 86 participants in Battambang and Kampong Cham provinces, including students, parents/caregivers, and school officers. The thematic analysis was utilized. The findings show that primary school children who are exposed to family adversity, including domestic violence, family division, and household socio-economic crisis, demonstrate symptoms of psychological distress, impaired social interaction, and poor school performance. Low school performance was often anticipated by the lack of parental involvement and the overall deficient quality of teaching.

**Keywords:** psychosocial challenges, adverse home environment, primary school children, learning difficulties

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## INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'learning difficulties' is often used interchangeably with 'learning disabilities' to refer to neurological disorders that make it difficult to acquire certain skills, notably in reading and mathematics (Penney, 2018). Although they should not constitute a barrier to learning as such, learners across the world are also facing difficulties learning because of physical impairments, including visual, hearing, or speaking impairments. The World Report on Disability found that, on average, approximately 5 students out of 50 deal with a form of learning difficulty (World Health Organization [WHO], 2011). A nationwide survey on the prevalence of disability among Cambodian children (2010-2012) showed that 5.5% of children aged 2-9 have moderate or severe cognitive impairment, 2.5% have moderate to severe hearing problems, and 3% were found to have a visual impairment (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2015). Yet, learners can face other obstacles to learning too. Low-performing students can, for instance, suffer from anxiety or low self-esteem. Family factors such as domestic violence or socioeconomic status are often reasons why students do not study in school (Gomes-Neto & Hanushek, 1994; The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2019).

The quality of teaching is key to overcome learning barriers (Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport [MoEYS], 2014, 2015, 2019).

After the Khmer Rouge regime fell in 1979, it took the country almost four decades to reopen a comprehensive public school network covering the whole country. Yet, the quality of education in Cambodia remains poor (Beyond Borders, 2017; Heng & Sol, 2022; McNamara, 2015; Sar, 2022; Song, 2015; Tandon & Fukao, 2015). Furthermore, many teachers in Cambodia lack the required knowledge on different learning difficulties and have little understanding of the strategies to overcome barriers to learning. Nor do they have access to adjusted learning materials (Benveniste et al., 2008; Sar, 2022). More generally, teachers require a strong and effective national support system or the help of specialists to identify learning difficulties which they currently lack in Cambodia. As a consequence, most children facing barriers remain under the radar and cannot reach their potential. While some NGOs (e.g., Rabbit School, ADEPASE, Save the Children, Kruosar Thmey) (United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2018) provide small-scale support, these projects focus mainly on students who have visual or hearing impairments or who face profound mental challenges and therefore are not able to attend a mainstream school. Little support is available for students with learning difficulties in regular schools.

This study seeks to shed light on the learning difficulties faced by primary school children in Cambodia, by focusing on the psychosocial challenges encountered at home. To achieve this, we focus on two primary research questions:

**Table 1.** Number of participants (n = 86)

Participants	Number of participants by type of interview		Number of participants by location				Total number of participants	
	IDI	FGD	Battambang		Kampong Cham		Total	Female
			Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural		
Primary school children	21		4	5	4	8	21	5
Parents/guardians	12	18	2	13	13	2	30	24
Primary school teachers	7	16	10	2	2	9	23	18
Primary school directors	4		1	1	1	1	4	2
District officers	2	6	1	1	2	4	8	5

**RQ1:** What are the psychosocial challenges that primary school children in Cambodia experience in their home environments?

**RQ2:** How do these psychosocial challenges influence their academic performance in school?

By answering these questions, we aim to enhance the understanding of the complex interplay between home life and educational outcomes. Our findings will provide valuable insights that can inform relevant ministries and decision-makers, enabling them to develop targeted strategies and interventions to mitigate the negative impact of home environments on children's learning performance. This research aspires to contribute to the improvement of educational policies and practices, ultimately fostering better learning outcomes for children in Cambodia.

## THE IMPACT OF THE HOME ENVIRONMENT ON SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Parents or caregivers play a fundamental role in children's academic achievement (Chohan & Qadir, 2013). The relationship between parent and child also significantly affects children's well-being and, in turn, their scholarly achievement (Chohan & Qadir, 2013). A research study by the Academy of Educational Planning and Management, Ministry of Education, Islamabad, Pakistan (AEPAM, 2005) claimed that almost 83% of teachers agreed that, in public primary schools, students repeated classes due to the lack of appropriate guidance at home. Similarly, Fan and Chen (2001) found that teachers of students who were slower to learn complained about the apparent lack of parental awareness of how important family support was for their child to succeed at school. Conversely, a study among 159 families in rural Cambodia showed that parental involvement in the process of their children's schooling positively affected children's educational participation (Keng, 2004). In Cambodia, parents who are involved in the schooling of their child are also likely to have higher academic aspirations and to contact their child's teacher (Eng et al., 2014; Soeung et al., 2011). In addition, parental involvement is higher among parents who have few children and greater family wealth. It was also noted that household socio-economic struggle to afford the cost of education affects the dropout rate among primary school children in rural Cambodia (No & Hirakawa, 2012).

Besides parental involvement in children's learning performance, other family characteristics, including family division and family violence, have been found to affect children's psychological well-being, and thus, learning performance. Parental separation or divorce is shown to have negative implications on children's mental well-being, long-term household socio-economic disadvantages, as well as children's school performance (Bernardi & Radl, 2014; Iqbal et al.,

2021). Children who were raised in economically unstable and disadvantaged families are at a higher risk for a variety of academic and social problems (Ackerman et al., 1999). Likewise, children who are exposed to domestic violence, for instance, are found to report feelings of loneliness, have more conflict with peers (McCloskey & Stuewig, 2001), reported more attention and conduct problems (Becker & McCloskey, 2002), and showed poorer school performance (Huth-Bocks et al., 2001).

In Cambodia, violence against children remains pervasive with over 50 percent of children reporting to have experienced a violent incident before the age of 18, and over one-third of children aged 13 to 17 reporting to have witnessed physical violence in their home within the last twelve months (UNICEF, 2014). Another study conducted with 993 male and 950 female junior high school students in urban and rural Cambodia revealed that 27.9% of male students and 21.5% of female students had been a victim of domestic violence at least once, while 18.0% of male and 5.8% of female students suffered violence within their community (Yi et al., 2012). Cambodian children raised in a family where a parent/caregiver was physically abused by another family member, or children themselves are the victim of domestic violence, show symptoms of depression – what is more, they are likely to internalize and externalize violent behavior in adolescence (Ong et al., 2017).

Anxiety and depression, and other forms of psychological distress caused by traumatic experiences such as domestic violence have a great impact on students' ability to learn (Chohan & Qadir, 2013; Marshall, 1996). School failure may reinforce or renew their distress (Marshall, 1996). Such problems grow in complexity when these students' needs are ignored or when their failures are met with disapproval by teachers, peers, and/or parents. Disapproval can take many forms, such as negative labeling of a child as 'slow', 'lazy', or 'dumb', or rejection by peers.

## METHOD

To explore the psychosocial challenges among Cambodian primary school children, this study adopted qualitative research designed using in-depth interviews (IDIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and classroom observations.

### Participants

The study was conducted in four primary schools in Battambang and Kampong Cham provinces. The provinces were selected based on their demographic and socio-economic status and were easily accessible to the research team. Among the 86 participants, 21 are students, 30 are caregivers, 23 are teachers, four are school directors, and eight are school officers (see **Table 1**). The primary students included in this study were referred to and identified by their teachers as low-

performing learners. Their parents were then also contacted for the interview. The consent was asked each time before the interview. A total of 46 IDIs were administered to children, parents/guardians, teachers, school directors, and administration officers. In addition, six FGDs were conducted (8 to 12 teachers or parents per FGD).

### Data Collection Procedure

The semi-structured interview guideline was developed for IDI and FGD. The IDIs and FGD took place in the school library or a classroom. The former lasted between 45 to 60 minutes, whereas the latter took between 60 to 90 minutes. Classroom observations were then conducted to understand children's learning and social interaction during lessons. The consent form was read by an interviewer and then signed by both participants and interviewer. In the interviews, children were asked to share challenges faced at home and school. Parents or guardians were enquired to reflect on general family life difficulties, parenting style, and parents' involvement in children's education. The interviews with teachers and school directors were focused on topics of identifying and overcoming children's learning difficulties, and professional development needs.

### Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The interviews were recorded and then transcribed from Khmer to English. The transcripts were read and re-read multiple times. The author wrote down the themes on the transcripts using color highlighters. The patterns and connections between the themes were explored until a cluster of related themes emerged. The themes were iteratively checked against the transcript to ensure that they were supported by the text. A list of representative quotations illustrating each theme was gathered. New themes were recognized as they emerged, while themes that were not supported by the evidence were then omitted.

## RESULTS

The findings are based on IDIs and FGDs with students, parents, teachers, and school principals. Firstly, some key themes on children's home environment will be discussed along with their impact on children's psychosocial well-being as well as learning performance. In the last section, we will illustrate and discuss children's psychosocial problems from the parent's and school's perceptions and knowledge.

### Adverse Home Environment

Adverse home environment factors, as discovered in this study, are long-lasting domestic violence and abuse and family division (either through spousal divorce/separation or parental migration). Almost a quarter of primary school children in this study experienced family adversities and a majority of them experienced psychological distress, commonly anxious and depressive feelings, and poor social relationships, on top of poor performance in school.

To start with, long-lasting domestic violence and abuse occurred in the family. For instance, spousal violence and child abuse were experienced or/and witnessed by almost half of the primary school students. Incidents of domestic violence occurred when the father or occasionally the mother got drunk. Some children were even the victim of physical abuse or violence at the hands of their parents. According to this study, approximately half of the children who are living in

environments where domestic violence takes place expressed feelings and symptoms of psychological distress including stress, anxiety, and depression. Witnessing regular violence at home at such a young age tremendously hammered the psychological and psychosocial well-being of primary school children as indicated in the case of Dina and Samnang (McCloskey & Stuewig, 2001; Becker & McCloskey, 2002). Both carry with them a great deal of fear and insecurity at home.

Dina, a 9-year-old boy who studied in grade 3, witnessed various forms of violence at home between parents and relatives who lived in the same household. His father is an alcoholic and violent person who beats Dina's mother when he is drunk. His aunt often fights with her husband, and they insult each other. By exposure to violence, Dina is often scared and agitated when people speak loudly.

I am living with my parents, aunts, uncle, cousins, and my siblings. We are 18 people. When my father was drunk, he beat my mom ... I saw my aunt and her husband fight, and they insulted each other almost every day. So, when other people spoke loudly, it made me panic or lose control. (Dina, 9-year-old boy)

Samnang, an 11-year-old boy in grade 4, lives with his mother, siblings, and other relatives in an extended family. Samnang's father is a construction worker in the city. Samnang witnesses violence at home by his alcohol-addicted father against his mother each time he visits home. Living in an extended family, Samnang is also exposed to ongoing couple conflicts and fights between his family members. He is constantly worried and anxious each time he witnesses violence at home.

My father drank and beat my mother. My uncle and auntie fight often at home ... I am so scared and worried that some of my family members might be killed by violence. (Samnang, 11-year-old boy)

Children from adverse family backgrounds tend to experience impaired social interaction with other children. The social relationship with others is disrupted, mainly through their irritative and aggressive reactions when interacting with their peers. In the case of Samnang, he expresses difficulty controlling his anger and gets easily frustrated while playing with or being around his classmates. He found it challenging to maintain good relationships with other children his age and often had conflicts with them. Many of the children subjected to such family predicaments were also reported to have conduct problems. The behavioral problems among primary school children, as identified by teachers in this study, are often exhibited in hyperactive behavior (cannot sit still during class) or impulsive and disturbing behaviors (disobeying instructions or rules, often arguing with or disturbing others).

Dara, a 13-year-old boy in grade 5, lives with his grandmother and a sister. His parents divorced when he was 4 months old. According to his grandmother, Dara steals money from home and mostly hangs out with friends playing football and gambling. At school, Dara spends most of his time on his smartphone playing video games. He sometimes escapes classes and fails to take notes and complete homework. He doesn't follow the teacher's instructions or advice. During the interview, Dara admitted this misbehavior and difficulty building relationships with his classmates.

I skipped classes to see my friend and we smoked cigarettes. Sometimes, they forced me to use drugs, but I refused. My classmates do not want to talk to me, they do not like me because I smoked cigarettes. My teacher hated me because I did not follow his advice. (Dara, 13-year-old boy)

Overwhelmed by frequent anxious and depressive feelings from growing up in a toxic home environment, children expressed that they are easily distracted and have poor concentration during class, which leads to *poor school performance*. Learning difficulties among primary school children who are exposed to adverse home environments manifested themselves in the form of difficulties in reading, writing, and mathematics. Nearly two-thirds of children in this study reported difficulties performing simple calculations including additions and subtractions. Multiplications and divisions were perceived as even more challenging. In addition, children reported experiencing challenges in reading, writing, and dictation of Khmer. In particular, they had difficulties distinguishing Khmer consonants and vowels, resulting in spelling and writing errors. Consequently, many children were deeply concerned about having to repeat a grade, others wished to quit school altogether.

During class observation, Dina demonstrated poor concentration. He could not even perform simple math calculations, although, during the interview, he claimed otherwise.

I am afraid that my mom or my auntie might die ... I go to school every day with my two brothers and my sister, but I cannot study well. I easily forget what I have learned from school. (Dina, 9-year-old boy)

Many children in this study who grow up in *divided and/or violent families* (either due to parental divorce/separation, or parental labor migration) are facing *household socio-economic predicament*. On the one hand, to compensate for the missing responsible adult figure at home, children in broken families reported taking an active role in family income earning and daily household duties, which affect their school attendance and participation in extra-class activities. On the other hand, due to low socio-economic status, parents are not financially capable of supporting their children's education (e.g., buying school materials, and school uniform), let alone pay for extra classes to catch up.

Samnang repeated grade 1 and grade 2 due to his poor performance. Alongside difficulty paying attention in classes due to living in a toxic home environment, Samnang often skipped classes to help his mother earn income.

Most of the time, I feel worried about the safety of some family members and our future, so I cannot concentrate on classes. I cannot remember the lesson ... Sometimes, I could not go to school because I needed to go to collect waste such as beer cans or water bottles during the wedding ceremonies to sell, so I could get some money to support the family, especially my mother. After school, I sometimes went fishing in the rice field. (Samnang, 11-year-old boy)

Chea's, a 14-year-old boy in grade 6, parents separated when he was 10 years old. He is living with his mother and 3 younger siblings. Living conditions have worsened since the divorce because his mother only earned income from a small grocery store. He was upset by the parental separation and that his father could no longer stay with him and support

the family. Chea reported repeating grade 1 two times in the first two years after his parents split up. Attending grade 6, Chea could not read or write well, though he indicated his good skill in math calculation. Chea attends school regularly, yet he finds it challenging to follow and remember lessons. As the oldest son, Chea helps with household chores to the point where he cannot attend extra classes/learning. With limited financial means, Chea reports being discriminated against by his classmates and, as a result, he became socially withdrawn.

Sometimes I go to school with no money ... I feel down and hopeless about daily life. I wish that I could save 1,000 Riel (0.25 cents) each day to buy study materials, but it's not possible as my family is poor. I feel being discriminated by my classmates who are from rich family. I feel ashamed ... I normally played and stayed alone during recess. (Chea, 14-year-old boy)

### Parents' Perceptions of Children's Psychosocial Problems

Although almost one-half of children in this study reported growing up with chronic domestic violence and abuse, the interviews and FGDs with parents showed that the majority of parents had a lack of conscious awareness of how such family adversity affects their children's learning performance. Parents do not fully understand whether and, if so, why, their child experiences difficulties at school, and only a few are, to some extent, aware that their home environment affects their child's school performance.

My husband beats me when he is drunk. He drinks every day. Although he behaves violently to me, I could not divorce him because I prioritize my children's future and schooling. I believe that the family problem affects my children's studies. Let's say my daughter, who is in grade 4, was so scared once she saw her father beat me. As a result, she cannot concentrate on her studies. (A mother of a grade 4 student)

Overwhelmed by household socio-economic challenges and ongoing domestic violence, parental involvement in children's learning process is completely absent and, in most cases, is worsened by the parent's own limited education. Some parents reported being too busy with their business or work, while others shared that they did not know how to help their children at home because of their low level of education. Many parents appeared not to check on their children's schoolwork or school attendance. Some had never contacted the teacher or school director.

I could not help my son with studies or homework. I stopped my studies at grade 2. I am mostly worried about trying to earn money to support this family. I can barely put three meals per day on our table. (a mother of an 11-year-old student)

I never checked my child's books or helped teach him at home because I didn't know how to. I never went to school in my life, so I can't read or write. (A mother of a 12-year-old boy studied grade 5 student)

Teachers and school authorities, on the other hand, lament the lack of effective communication between educators and parents and the support from parents in children's learning process. Parental involvement effectively contributes to children's learning at home, as well as in school.



## Teacher's Knowledge of Children's Psychosocial Problems

Deficient knowledge and training on children's psychosocial problems were the main constraints among primary school teachers as shown in this study, despite teachers frequently reported being overwhelmed when dealing with children with such challenges. Most of the teachers in FGDs pinpointed social isolation, lack of confidence, and less attentiveness as common characteristics of students who might be exposed to unpleasant home environments. Yet, the majority of teachers were not aware that such characters are the symptoms of children's psychological distress when they are, more often than not, facing adversity at home. Just a few teachers were able to draw the link between children's psychosocial challenges and their potential influence on children's learning performance.

We don't have knowledge of psychosocial challenges or mental health problems. We never get training on this topic. So, I don't understand when we talk about this topic. But I know that when a student has a psychological problem, it can affect his/her learning performance. (Teacher, Kampong Cham Province)

Teachers claimed the lack of pedagogical documents and training to specifically address the students with learning difficulties. Although, during the FGD, a majority of teachers did refer to the book from MoEYS on "Methods of helping the slow learner" – it was not perceived as very helpful. Teachers also lamented the lack of supportive materials, such as assessment tools to identify children's psychosocial challenges (Kheang et al., 2018). Another major obstacle to identifying and supporting children who face psychosocial challenges is class size. In Cambodia, classes are very large. Notably, Cambodia has the largest student-teacher ratio in East Asia at 51:1 at the primary level. Rural primary schools tend to have higher numbers of students per classroom than urban schools (Benveniste et al., 2008). Both educators and education authorities mentioned that it is hard to manage the class and ensure the quality of teaching when classes are overcrowded.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The current study points out the link between students' psychosocial challenges faced in adverse home environments and children's school performance. Many primary school children in Cambodia face various adversities at home as revealed in this study, causing feelings of anxiety, depression, and other psychological distress, that in turn affect their learning progress. Unpleasant life experiences in the home environment, such as family separation, either through a divorce or parental migration, domestic violence and child abuse, and socio-economic difficulties, appear to be substantial factors determining the severity of psychosocial challenges among primary school children. Some children directly witnessed domestic violence in households, and others even reported being the victim of physical violence. Living and growing up in such adverse home environments where children are continuously exposed to prolonged and repeated trauma, children are more at risk of suffering psychological distress (McCloskey & Stuewig, 2001; Ong et al., 2017; Yi et al., 2012). Psychosocial challenges affect children's learning performance and achievement as they can no longer focus on school (Alesi et al., 2014; Chohan & Qadir, 2013; Fan & Chen, 2001; Mahuro & Hungi, 2016; Marshall, 1996).

This study showed that few parents are involved in the learning trajectory of their children for several reasons, i.e., parents' level of education, unavailability due to business involvement, and feeling hopeless. Yet parental involvement in children's schooling, at home and through regular connection with school and teachers, is essential to effective learning among primary school children. Likewise, parent's own education is an essential factor that promotes parent's involvement in children's learning process (Eng et al., 2009; Gonida & Cortina, 2014; Keng, 2004; Khajehpour & Ghazvini, 2011; Soeung et al., 2011). Moreover, parent-teacher collaboration and communication in children's learning progress are currently not strengthened in the education system. Such collaboration is nevertheless crucial in addressing children's learning difficulties and should be reinforced and be part of the school development plan and agenda.

As the Cambodian education system is struggling to build up the teaching skills and knowledge of pedagogy among primary and secondary school teachers (Benveniste et al., 2008), the majority of teachers are not yet sufficiently equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to identify and support children with learning difficulties. While teachers are aware of children's learning difficulties, such as poor performance in Khmer literacy study, mathematics, and other learning activities, only a few teachers could link poor learning performance and psychosocial challenges. With the vast majority of teachers lacking the knowledge and skills to identify and overcome psychosocial problems among children, teachers pointed to the need for support materials, such as a tool to identify psychosocial challenges to assist school leaders and teachers in responding more effectively to children's needs.

This study focused on exploring psychological challenges stemming from adverse home environments as factors of learning difficulties among Cambodian primary school children. So, future studies should explore and distinguish learning difficulty as an outcome of other diagnoses, including ADHD and other intellectual impairments that are known to affect learning performance at school.

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**Ethics declaration:** The authors declared that this study was exempted from ethics approval by the Ethics Committee because this study was part of pilot assessment of children's learning challenges at schools for tool development on psychosocial distress among primary school children in Cambodia. It was part of the collaborating project between two organizations: Louvain corporation and VVOB. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their inclusion in the study. Participants were informed about the purpose, procedures, potential risks,

and benefits of the study, as well as their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

**Declaration of interest:** Authors declare no competing interest.

**Data availability:** All personal data collected during the study was anonymized and securely stored in encrypted digital files. Access to the data was restricted to the authorized research team only, and data will be retained for five years following publication, after which it will be permanently deleted. Data generated or analyzed during this study are available from the authors on request.

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