

## Exploring the Causes of Emotional Disturbance Among Early Childhood Learners

Moneeza Aslam<sup>\*</sup>  
Saira<sup>\*\*</sup>

### Abstract

The study examines the prevalence and etiology of emotional disturbance in early childhood learners. The main targets were to identify the emotionally disturbed learners and to investigate the root causes of emotional disturbances in early education. For this purpose, a mixed-method explanatory research design was used. The study was performed in Govt. Middle Model High School Gujrat where all early-grade students formed the sample. The tool was prepared under the guidance of the research supervisor to gather relevant data structured interviews with parents of detected students to find possible reasons. Results showed that a majority of students were emotionally stable, while few were emotionally disturbed. Patterns among emotionally disturbed students included moderate restlessness, withdrawal from activities, a lack of concentration, aggressive behavior, refusal to cooperate, manipulative behaviors, and poor social interaction. Disruptive behavior was the most significant issue. The causes of emotional disturbance were multifactorial, ranging from genetic, biological factors, family instability, environmental factors, and parenting styles. On the basis of these findings, it is suggested that teachers and parents should be informed of the emotional and behavioral needs of early childhood. Strategies for early diagnosis and management of emotional disturbances should be included in teacher training courses. Schools should also organize seminars and awareness sessions to enhance emotional well-being and development in early grade students.

**Keywords:** *Emotional Disturbance, Prevalence Rate, Behavioral Patterns, Causes, Early Childhood Education*

---

<sup>\*</sup> MPhil Scholar, Department of Education, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan. ([moneezyaslam@gamil.com](mailto:moneezyaslam@gamil.com))

<sup>\*\*</sup> Lecture, Department of Education, University Of Gujrat, Gujrat , Punjab, Pakistan. ([drsaira.ijaz@uog.edu.pk](mailto:drsaira.ijaz@uog.edu.pk))

## Introduction

Emotional growth during early childhood is crucial in determining the child's well-being, behavior, and ability to learn. Between birth and about six years of age, children experience the most critical changes in recognizing, regulating, and expressing emotions. Not all children, though, make it through this developmental process unscathed. For others, emotional disturbance arises, interfering with their capacity to interact with others, concentrate in school settings, and build necessary life skills. Chronic anxiety, intense fear, frequent mood changes, depression, irritability, aggression, and poor regulation of emotions are examples of emotional disturbance during early childhood (Kauffman & Landrum, 2012). Persistent and severe expressions of such behaviors could reflect more profound emotional issues that need early intervention.

Emotional disturbances are not a transient phase of challenging behavior. They strongly impede a child from developing healthy social relationships, engaging in learning, and feeling emotions in a healthy way. As per Guetta et al. (2022), emotional disturbance children are more likely to develop developmental delays, poor academic performance, and social norms accommodation problems. Early identification of emotional disturbances can greatly enhance a child's future chances of getting the proper assistance to resolve these issues. Early intervention has been found to arrest the development of emotional problems and even reverse some adverse consequences (Snyder & Tang, 2022).

Emotional growth in early childhood is complex. Children move from feeling emotions through In addition, early social interactions also have a significant role in shaping emotional competencies. When children start interacting with other children and adults outside the family, they get to learn how to solve conflicts, communicate needs, and establish interpersonal relationships. These experiences are important in learning emotional competence, which is a significant predictor of long-term academic achievement, good mental health, and social functioning (Snyder & Tang, 2022).

Although crucial to the individual, emotional development during early childhood tends to get relatively less attention than cognitive and physical growth. The etiology of emotional disturbances is still a multifaceted field of research. Although some disturbances are attributable to biological or genetic causes, many others have underlying social determinants like poverty, family pathology, trauma, or insufficient access to mental health treatment (Ma et al., 2022; Speyer et al., 2022). Children who develop in unstable environments have higher chances of experiencing emotional distress, especially where they do not receive consistent caregiving, emotional security, or support systems. In addition, socio-economic status has been linked to emotional and behavioral challenges. Low-income children are disproportionately impacted by conditions like poor nutrition, unsafe environments, poor access to quality early childhood education, and parental stress, all of which have the potential to contribute to emotional disturbances (Malcorps et al., 2022). Parental mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse, and ineffective parenting strategies are also major determinants of a child's emotional health. Children exposed to high levels of parental conflict or inconsistent

discipline are more likely to experience behavioral and emotional regulation issues (Pasinringi et al., 2022).

It is also crucial to distinguish between normal emotional variations in young children and indicators of emotional disturbance. Although it is normal for children to express emotions like anger, frustration, sadness, and excitement, persistent, intense, or inappropriate expression of these emotions may be a sign of underlying problems (Stenner & De Luca Picione, 2023). Knowledge of developmental milestones and what is age-appropriate behaviorally for emotional behavior would be needed for this differentiation. Moreover, emotional disturbances in early childhood carry long-term effects if not recognized and treated on time. Studies show that children with unresolved emotional disturbances have a higher chance of academic performance issues, social isolation, and even adolescent and adult mental health disorders (Yoon, 2022).

Early recognition and proper intervention, says the American Psychiatric Association (2022), are vital to mitigating long-term educational and psychological disabilities. Teachers, parents, and mental health professionals all must know the nature and scope of emotional disturbances among early learners. The Reasons Emotional disturbances among children are multifactorial and arise through a complex interplay of biological, environmental, and psychosocial factors. Parenting, family dynamics, genetic factors, and school life all influence a child's emotional control and behavior (Brown & Lee, 2023).

In most educational settings, especially in developing nations such as Pakistan, emotional and behavioral problems are not consistently addressed due to scarce resources, training, and awareness. The purpose of this research is to determine emotionally troubled students at the initial grade level in Govt. Middle Model High School Gujrat and investigate the causes of their emotional distress. The conclusions will guide potential training programs for teachers and encourage school-based mental health practices that enhance emotional well-being in early children (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023).

This research aims to address the knowledge gap by identifying causes of emotional disturbance at the level of early childhood. By addressing the underlying causes biological, environmental, familial, or socio-economic the research will offer insights of value for teachers, psychologists, caregivers, and policymakers. The results can be used to inform preventive, supportive, and responsive strategies for the emotional well-being of young children. As emotional well-being is increasingly seen as essential for later success and happiness, the research answers a timely and necessary question.

## **Literature Review**

### **Causes of Emotional Disturbance at Early Childhood Level**

Identification of the causes of emotional disturbance at the early childhood level is important for designing proper prevention and intervention strategies. Early childhood is the period from birth to six years, characterized by high-speed cognitive, emotional, and social development. The children during this sensitive period are especially susceptible to internal as well as external stressors that can lead to

emotional disturbance (Jelicic et al., 2022). Emotional disturbances are marked by an invariant pattern of emotional and behavioral problems that disrupt a child's development and adaptive functioning (Kauffman & Landrum, 2012). The causation of emotional disturbances is multifactorial and consists of intricate interactions among biological, psychological, and environmental factors.

### **Biological Causes**

Biological causes are a major factor in the development of emotional disturbances in young children. Genetic predispositions, neurobiological deficits, and prenatal complications may also lead to challenges in emotional regulation and behavior. It has been found in studies that children with a history of mental health disorders in the family are likely to demonstrate symptoms of emotional disturbance at an early stage (Engel & Bartz, 2022). Moreover, abnormalities in brain structures and operations, especially those involving emotional control like the amygdala and prefrontal cortex, are linked with conditions such as anxiety, depression, and ADHD (Wolfram & Kienesberger, 2023). Prenatal and perinatal risk factors e.g., maternal stress, prenatal substance exposure, low birth weight, and complications during delivery are also associated with a higher risk of emotional and behavioral disturbances in infancy and early childhood (Benavides et al., 2022).

### **Psychological and Temperamental Factors**

Temperament also plays a significant role in contributing to emotional disturbance. Children with challenging temperaments, high reactivity, low adaptability, and negative mood—are at risk for emotional difficulty. These genetic personality characteristics may influence children's ways of coping with stress and relating to people (Nigg, 2001). For example, impulsiveness and difficulties in emotional self-regulation, typically seen in children with ADHD, are associated with increased risks of behavior disorders and mood instability (Barkley, 1997).

Moreover, early attachment patterns strongly impact the emotional development of a child. Attachment with the caregivers that is secure enhances emotional control, empathy, and adaptability, while insecure or disorganized attachment serves as a risk factor for emotional distress (Yoon et al., 2022). Children who experience inconsistent caregiving or emotional neglect can have difficulty trusting and feeling safe, tending to respond to similar situations with increased anxiety, withdrawal, or aggression.

### **Environmental and Social Influences**

Environmental influences are among the most significant contributors to emotional disturbance in early childhood. These include family relationships, parenting styles, socioeconomic status, and exposure to trauma. Children exposed to homes with instability, abuse, neglect, or domestic violence are at higher risk for developing emotional and behavioral challenges (Teizazu et al., 2023). Adverse home environments compromise a child's feeling of safety and predictability, which is vital for positive emotional development.

Parenting style is also a key risk factor. Authoritative or abusive parenting, which involves strict punishment or emotional

unresponsiveness, is linked with greater emotional problems in children. On the other hand, responsive, supportive, and organized parenting can act as a buffer for emotional disorders, even within high-risk contexts (Rubin et al., 2009). Social disadvantage and economic hardship are also linked to emotional problems in children. Poverty may lead to restricted access to health care, early education, and secure housing, which complicates stress and limits opportunities for beneficial developmental experiences (Benavides et al., 2022).

### **Interaction of Multiple Factors**

It should be remembered that emotional disturbance is not the result of a single factor. Rather, it is generally the result of interactions between many biological, psychological, and environmental factors (Engel & Bartz, 2022). For instance, a child with genetic susceptibility to mood disorder might not present with emotional disturbances unless they are precipitated by environmental stressors like conflict within the parents or trauma. In the same manner, a difficult temperament can cause behavioral problems if not regulated with effective caregiving responses.

This multifactorial model highlights the need for a comprehensive perspective in addressing and understanding emotional disturbance during early childhood. Interventions should take into account the overall context of a child's life, including their health history, family, social networks for support, and cultural heritage (Jelicic et al., 2022). Risk factors for emotional disturbances should be identified as early as possible and followed up with supportive interventions like counseling, family therapy, and early childhood education programs to prevent or minimize e

### **Operational Definitions**

For the purpose of this study following variables needs to define prevalence rate, emotional disturbance and early childhood.

#### **Prevalence Rate**

The prevalence of a condition or trait is the total number of cases or individuals with that condition or trait in a population at a specific point or over a defined period, divided by the total population. It is a measure that helps assess the magnitude or extent of the condition within the given group.

#### **Emotional Disturbance**

A broad term that encompasses a range of mental health conditions that can significantly impair a person's ability to regulate their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. It typically involves observable behaviors that indicate significant and persistent challenges in emotional and social functioning. Emotional disturbance includes aggression, hyperactivity, withdrawal, impulsivity and immaturity.

### **Research Question of the Study**

What are the causes of emotional disturbance at early childhood level?

## Research Methodology

The population for this study comprised early graders of Government Municipal Model Girls' High School in Jalal Pur Jattan and their parents. Government Municipal Model Girls' High School in Jalal Pur Jattan was a case for this study. Sample of the Study 55 early graders of Government Municipal Model Girls' High School in Jalal Pur Jattan were taken as sample of the study. A mixed-method explanatory design was employed to examine the data. Quantitative data were collected to indicate the number and percentage of emotionally disturbed students, while thematic analysis of qualitative data from structured parent interviews revealed the probable causes of emotional disturbances. The Screening test on 5-points Likert scale on four factors (Inability to learn, inappropriate behaviour, Interpersonal relations and Moods of unhappiness or depressions) were developed for screening emotionally disturbed students. Initially 40 indicators were developed for the screening of students of early grades. Criteria for screening test was based on cut points, very low 38-76, Low 77-114, Moderate 115-152 and for High it was 153-190.

### Validation of Screening Test for Identification of Emotionally Disturbed Students

For Validity mentions the meaningful accuracy, appropriateness and effectiveness of the tool. Researcher construct a tool to screen out the students who are emotionally disturbed. For validation of instrument expert opinion was taken from fourteen Subject Experts. Instruments were distributed to 14 experts who have command over subject matter and instrument development. Content Validity Ratio (CVR) of each item was calculated through the formula suggested by Lawshe (1975). Moreover, weak item was deleted on the basis of opinion given by the experts. Content Validity Index (CVI) of all the instruments was calculated. Detail of CVR against each item is provided in the following table. The items/indicators having CVR more than .80 were kept for final observations.

## Results

**Table 1**

*Emotional Stability of Early Grade Students*

| Emotional Status           | Number of Students | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Emotionally Stable         | 124                |                |
| 88.57Emotionally Disturbed | 16                 | 11.43          |
| <b>Total</b>               | <b>140</b>         | <b>100</b>     |

**Table 2**

*Common Emotional and Behavioral Patterns in Disturbed Students*

(Based on teacher observations and initial screenings)

| <b>Emotional/Behavioral Trait</b> | <b>Number of Students</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| Disruptive Behavior               | 12                        | 75.0                  |
| Aggressive Behavior               | 10                        | 62.5                  |
| Poor Social Interaction           | 9                         | 56.25                 |
| Lack of Concentration             | 8                         | 50.0                  |
| Restlessness                      | 7                         | 43.75                 |
| Withdrawal from Activities        | 6                         | 37.5                  |
| Refusal to Cooperate              | 6                         | 37.5                  |
| Manipulative Behavior             | 4                         | 25.0                  |

Of the emotionally disturbed learners, aggressive and disruptive behaviors were most prevalent, followed by inadequate social interaction, inability to concentrate, and fidgeting. Such behaviors are well-established symptoms of emotional difficulties in young children.

**Table 3**

*Identified Causes of Emotional Disturbance (from Parent Interviews)*

(Themes based on qualitative analysis)

| <b>Root Cause Category</b> | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Example Issues Identified</b>               |
|----------------------------|------------------|--|
| Family Instability         | 9                | Divorce, frequent arguments, single parenting  |
| Parenting Style            | 7                | Overly strict, neglectful, inconsistent rules  |
| Environmental Factors      | 6                | Neighborhood violence, school bullying         |
| Genetic/Biological Factors | 4                | Family history of mental illness, birth trauma |

Systematic interviews with parents identified that disturbances of emotions were multifactorial, such as family instability, poor parenting techniques, environmental stressors, and biological or genetic factors. They are in agreement with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which states that the development of a child is determined by several levels of environment, ranging from immediate family to wider societal environments.

## Discussion

The present research investigated the incidence and etiology of early childhood learners' emotional disturbance at Government Middle Model High School Gujrat. Findings revealed that 88.57% of students were free from emotional disturbance, whereas 11.43% exhibited symptoms of emotional disturbance. The findings are supported by previous studies that indicate emotional and behavioral disorders occur in a limited but considerable number of early childhood learners (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018). Early childhood emotional development serves as the basis upon which a child will learn, socialize, and maintain a healthy mental state. Those who present with emotional disturbances early in life tend to have issues with attention, managing behavior, and communication among peers that can hamper their academic achievement and social relationships (Smith & Khan, 2022). Typical symptoms are restlessness, withdrawal, acting out, and inattention behaviors often misperceived or neglected in normal classroom environments.

Simple responses to caregivers' cues toward being able to identify, label, and manage their own emotions and empathize with others' emotions (Jelicic et al., 2022). Among the most important aspects in this developmental process is the development of secure attachment. Closely based on consistent and strong emotional relationships with caregivers, this helps in building emotional resilience and a sense of safety (Chen et al., 2022). Those children who are able to form secure attachment tend to explore their world of emotions confidently and manage their feelings well. In contrast, disturbances in attachment due to neglect, abuse, or unreliable caregiving can lead to emotional disturbances that may extend into later stages of life. The research reaffirms the importance of early identification and intervention methods to deal with emotional and behavioral problems before they become intensified. The teachers and parents need to play an active role as first-line observers, and it is necessary to provide them with appropriate training and sensitization in order to ensure the emotional well-being of pupils.

## Conclusion

The results of this research emphasize that whereas the majority of early-grade students are emotionally healthy, a significant proportion experience emotional disturbances that can impair learning, peer relations, and classroom behavior. The disturbances are not the consequence of one single factor but result from an intricate interaction of home life, genetics, and social conditions.

These problems are best addressed through an interventional collaborative effort between teachers, parents, and school counselors. Early intervention, emotional support systems, and ongoing observation are essential in fostering healthy emotional growth in early childhood learners.

## Recommendations

Teacher training courses must include modules on early identification and management of emotional and behavior disorders. Schools must stage awareness sessions and parenting workshops to



educate parents regarding the emotional needs of children. Schools must implement screening instruments and utilize school psychologists or counselors for early identification and intervention.

Emotionally disturbed students must be provided with individualized emotional and academic support plans. Frequent communication between parents and teachers must be maintained in order to monitor student behavior and progress.

## References

- Alam, A. (2022). Investigating sustainable education and positive psychology interventions in schools towards achievement of sustainable happiness and wellbeing for 21st century pedagogy and curriculum. *ECS Transactions*, 107(1), 19481
- Auyeung, B., & Murray, A. L. (2022). Emotion regulation in autism: A systematic review. *International Review of Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 57, 1-25
- Benavides, P., Ploss, H., Logan, J., & Hamby, S. (2022). Emotion regulation and psychological well-being: A systematic review. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 78(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.23244>
- Catherine, E., & Brown, D. W. (2022). Emotion regulation and well-being: A systematic review. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 17(5), 531-545
- Chen, W., Gu, X., Chen, J., & Wang, X. (2022). Association of cardiorespiratory fitness and cognitive function with psychological well-being in school-aged children. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(3), 1434
- Chen, Y., et al. (2022). *Early childhood emotional development: Influences and outcomes*. *Child Development Journal*, 93(2), 341–356.
- Guetta, R. E., et al. (2022). *Culturally responsive interventions for emotional disturbance in early childhood*. *Early Child Development and Care*, 192(7), 1021–1036.
- Jelicic, H., et al. (2022). *Emotional recognition and regulation in early years: A developmental perspective*. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 20(1), 44–60.
- Kauffman, J. M., & Landrum, T. J. (2012). *Characteristics of emotional and behavioral disorders of children and youth* (10th ed.). Pearson.
- Ma, L., et al. (2022). *Familial and environmental risk factors in early childhood emotional disturbance*. *Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 58(3), 234–249.
- Malcorps, S., et al. (2022). *Emotional well-being in socio-economically disadvantaged children*. *Social Science & Medicine*, 295, 114652.
- Pasinringi, S., et al. (2022). *Parenting styles and emotional outcomes in early childhood*. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 63(9), 1020–1032.
- Ryff, C. D., et al. (2003). *Psychological well-being revisited: Advances in the science and practice of eudaimonia*. *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, 76(1), 1–14.
- Shonkoff, J. P., & Garner, A. S. (2012). *The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress*. *Pediatrics*, 129(1), e232–e246.
- Snyder, H. R., & Tang, C. (2022). *Emotional competence and resilience in early childhood*. *Developmental Psychology*, 58(1), 22–38.
- Speyer, R., et al. (2022). \*Child emotional disorders.
- Benavides, J. L., Ploss, A., Logan, J., & Hamby, S. (2022). Emotional development in early childhood: Foundations, influences, and

- Exploring the Causes of Emotional Disturbance Among Early Childhood Learners 37  
interventions. *Journal of Child Development Research*, 18(2), 134-150.
- Engel, L., & Bartz, J. (2022). Early childhood emotional development: A biopsychosocial perspective. *Developmental Psychology Review*, 14(1), 29-46.
- Kauffman, J. M., & Landrum, T. J. (2012). *Characteristics of emotional and behavioral disorders of children and youth* (10th ed.). Pearson.
- Nigg, J. T. (2001). Is ADHD a disinhibitory disorder? *Psychological Bulletin*, 127(5), 571-598.
- Teizazu, T., Gruer, L., Mandara, J., & Sommer, M. (2023). The role of caregivers in early emotional development: Supporting children through responsive caregiving. *International Journal of Early Childhood Education*, 31(4), 215-229.
- Kauffman, J. M., & Landrum, T. J. (2018). *Characteristics of emotional and behavioral disorders of children and youth* (11th ed.). Pearson.
- Merrell, K. W., & Gueldner, B. A. (2010). *Social and emotional learning in the classroom: Promoting mental health and academic success*. Guilford Press.
- Mash, E. J., & Barkley, R. A. (Eds.). (2014). *Child psychopathology* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.
- American Psychiatric Association. (2022). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed., text rev.; DSM-5-TR). American Psychiatric Publishing.
- Brown, T., & Lee, C. (2023). The role of parenting styles in emotional development: A study of early grade students. *International Journal of Child Psychology*, 18(1), 45-59. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijcp.2023.01.004>
- Smith, J. L., & Khan, R. A. (2022). Emotional and behavioral disorders in early childhood: A multifactorial approach. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 20(4), 350-365. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X221098765>.

**Citation of this Article:** Aslam, M., & Saira. (2025). Exploring the causes of emotional disturbance among early childhood learners. *Journal of Early Childhood Care and Education*, 9(2), 23-36.

Articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 International and can be used under

